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The Dead Square Sport's Double.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, Jr.



Leaning forward, the stranger, clad in the marooned sport's habiliments, waited and watched.

The Dead-Square Sport's Double;

OR,

Dare Deverell's Life Hustle.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "SPARKLER SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A GOLDEN LURE.

"Well, if I ever! No, I never!"

Dare Deverell checked his good steed with a hand so strong that its haunches almost touched that dusty trail, jaws parting under the pressure of the curb with a snort half of pain, half of impatience, while its rider leaned forward, his eyes aglow with strong curiosity.

There, directly in the stage road which led from Upper crust to Paradise Park, gleamed and glittered the cause of this hasty stoppage: a score or more of yellow disks, and close beside them a partially-opened pocketbook of well-worn leather.

"The wreck of a national bank, or a runaway cashier gone bust!" muttered the Sport from Paradise Park, when he fairly satisfied himself this was no optical delusion. "Gold to chuck at the toads, and—who owns it?"

Deverell flashed a swift look around in all directions, but those keen eyes failed to detect aught of human life; and once more they came back to that scattered coin; double-eagles, one and all!

To all seeming the pocketbook had been dropped by the owner, opening from the weight of golden coin it carried.

And yet, why had not its loss been recognized through that very weight? Why left lying here to tempt the first comer?

"Crazy, drunk, or in too big a hurry to stop even for ducats?" Dare Deverell asked himself, once more looking around like one hoping to solve a mystery thus. "Looks like—Where's his tracks, though?"

Iron-shod hoofs and heavy wheels had ground the stony soil to a gray powder, yet those keen eyes failed to detect aught in the way of tracks which could aid in casting light upon this odd affair; and then, with an impatient grunt, he swung himself out of the saddle, moving a little to one side where he could toss reins over a convenient bush.

The stage-trail was bordered on either side with rocks and scrubby bushes, with here and there a gnarled, distorted tree.

Ahead, the road ran straight and fairly level for a quarter of a mile, but to the rear all view was cut off by the abrupt curve Dare Deverell had so recently rounded on horseback.

"Maybe the pocketbook'll tell, but if not—well, it's finders keepers out in this wooden country, I reckon!"

The Sport from Paradise stooped to pick up the note book, first of all, but his fingers hardly touched it, for just then a skulking form broke cover, crossing the space between in a cat-like leap, striking as he came.

A stunning blow sent Deverell forward upon his face in the dust, while an active enemy alighted upon his back, dexterous hands drawing a thick sack over his head and to his throat, there to be closed tightly with a draw-string, thus effectually blinding the luckless Sport.

There was never a drop of craven blood in those veins, and taken completely by surprise though he was, with senses all but knocked out of him by that heavy foul blow from behind, Dare Deverell fought as fiercely as lay in his power; but fought in vain.

Nothing short of both hands could tear off that cunningly-contrived muffler, and the instant the hoodwink was applied, the as yet unseen assailant caught Deverell's arms forcing them backward where, aided by his supple legs and pinioning knees, the Unknown quickly applied bonds strong enough to defy even the natural powers of the Paradise Park delegate.

"Easy, you hot-head!" came a swift warning, in strangely croaking tones. "Every kick'll only hurt yourself the worse. Play white, and you may come out jaybird in the end, but—"

"Let up, curse ye!" panted the Sport, struggling as best he could.

Instead, another stroke fell upon his muffled head, still further scattering his wits and leaving him weak and powerless as a new-born babe.

The Unknown worked swiftly, and by the time that Deverell began to rally from that second blow, he was ready to add words to action, for the Sport was now completely hampered and past the power of making even the faintest semblance of a fight.

"Now, pardner, business is business, and I'm its proph t!" came that peculiar croaking once more; hardly like the natural notes of a human being, even to those muffled ears.

"People call you the Dare-devil Sport, and in order to fairly live up to the title I suppose you feel bound to kick, and to make each kick worthy the proverbial bay steer; but, just now, that's nonsense, or worse!"

"Kicking can't save you, and there's only one thing that can. If my little game pans out all right, I'll come back here and set you at liberty once more."

"If it fails—well, still I'll come back, but then 'twill be to take full pay out of your precious hide for lack of better!"

"I don't—Who in thunder are you, anyway?" came indistinctly through that thick muffler.

"That's all right, pardner. You ask no questions and I'll tell you fewer lies. I'm what I am, and just what that may be—well, if you live long enough, Dare-devil, I reckon you'll learn all about it—and possibly a bit too soon for your own peace of mind or comfort of body, too!"

A curious-sounding laugh or chuckle followed this enigmatical speech; then came the additional words:

"As I told you, pardner, business is business, and that's just like this: I've set out to accomplish a certain thing, and a mere trifle like slitting your throat, or perforating your gizzard, isn't going to bar my way to that same goal."

"Now, I'm going to borrow a few of your belongings, Dare-devil. I'll treat you white, if you'll let me, and pay you well for all I take. If you're fool enough to kick against the pricks, so much the worse for your mother's darling!"

"Give me half a show, you cur, and I'll—"

"Prove yourself worthy of your nickname, no doubt," came the quick interjection. "You'd fight a stack of wildcats naked-handed, I know, Dare-devil, but I—well, I'm heap sight different, don't you see?"

"I've caught you foul all over! I've got you trigged out so that an infant in arms might wallow you in the dust and never get his pinafore soiled. I can play all around you in spite of your best, and never turn a hair. So, why make an ugly matter far worse?"

Instead of responding in words, the Sport made desperate efforts to break away once more; but again without the slightest degree of success.

Thus hampered he was powerless, and the Unknown held him with ease until his fruitless efforts ceased.

"Are you all idiot, Dare-devil? Can't you take your medicine when it's held to your lips? Must I—eh?"

That brief hiatus was significantly filled. Strong hands closed about the Sport's throat, while a heavy knee bore with paralyzing force against his spinal column. Then one hand briefly shifted to press the keen point of a blade through the garments covering his back while that queer voice spoke on:

"One jab and out goes your light, pardner! Don't force me to go quite that far, will you?"

"I'll play even if it takes my life!" panted the dauntless Deverell, though his useless struggles ceased for the moment.

"That's all right, too, Dare-devil, and when my time rolls round I'll swallow the dose with greater grace than you've been able to show, so far."

"Now, for the last time, business! I'm going to slacken the bonds on your arms a bit, but if you give me too much trouble,

I'll simply shut down on you, once for all!"

With deft hands the Unknown fell to work, removing those bonds far enough to slip off the gray cloth coat worn by the Dare-devil Sport, yet at the same time contriving to hold Deverell impotent, then as quickly replacing the hobbles once more.

The victim of that golden lure was expecting something more than this, and was gathering his powers for a supreme effort; but the change was made before he could fully realize how his last chance was slipping away, and the as yet unseen assailant merely laughed in scorn at his futile struggles when the coat was secured.

"Ah, come, now!" with a mocking echo to his croaking tones. "You advertise to be a man of nerve, yet you're acting more like a cranky kid than aught better. I'd hate to play the slipper act to one of your reputation, Dare devil, but I'll surely apply that remedy unless—so!"

In spite of his fierce rage Deverell lay quiet, convinced at last that his struggles were vain, and only drawing worse upon his head.

"Now, that's a little more like it!" came the approving words. "You can get along without acting the fool, can't you?"

"It's your turn now, but mine may come later."

"Of course; but while upon this side of the Great Divide, pardner, you want to toe the crack and walk a chalk-line."

"As I told you before, this is solid business, and your share depends mainly upon the sort of clean-up I get when the sluicing's done."

"If it pans out anything equal to what I'm figuring on, well and good for both you and I! In that case I'll come back this way and set you at liberty, thanking you for the unwilling aid you've granted me, and maybe, slipping a few pretty rocks inside your kicks!"

"If not—for there's a reverse to even the fairest of prospects, remember—well, so much the worse for all concerned!"

By this time the Dare-devil Sport had fairly rallied his scattered wits and was trying his level best to recognize that curiously-sounding voice, hoping by that means to identify the person to whom he owed such humiliating treatment.

All in vain, so far as that went; if not purposely disguised, he certainly had never before listened to those queer tones.

Silence reigned for a full minute, and then Deverell wondered whether or not this Unknown had taken his departure for good and all?

The blindfolded and bound Sport strained his ears for a while, hearing naught to indicate the presence of an enemy; but the instant he made a more decisive move—striving his utmost to wrench his hands out of that close coil—a strong hand grasped his shoulder while another slipped under his legs at the bend of the knees, heaving his weight fairly clear of the ground, while a voice uttered:

"Steady, pardner! You're going to take a bit of a ride, just for luck! Steady! If you take a tumble instead, 'tis at the risk of your own precious bones!"

With a seeming ease which few men of his acquaintance could have displayed, Deverell was swung fairly into the saddle, then moved forward at a foot-pace, whither he had no means of knowing, thanks to that cunningly contrived muffler.

That jaunt proved to be but a brief one, and as the horse was once more brought to a halt, the Unknown as quickly removed his captive from the saddle, dumping him unceremoniously upon the flinty ground, saying, still in his hoarse, croaking accents:

"Stay put, Dare devil, or fare worse! You've my pledge, now I'll give you my promise. Refuse to do just as I bid you and I'll kill you without the faintest show of pity or of mercy!"

The click of cocking revolver; then a cold muzzle touched his head!

CHAPTER II.

A DARE-DEVIL EXPLOIT.

THROUGH those muffling folds came that pressure, yet Dare Deverell could by no chance mistake its full meaning; the cocked

pistol was held firmly against his forehead, while its owner spoke on in stern, pitiless tones:

"Of course I'd rather spare than kill, pardner; but I'm singing you a gospel hymn, just now!"

"Keep quiet if you value life! Play lamb, since you can't be a licn. Stay put for one solid hour, or pay full penalty! And that same penalty is— Mark it well, pardner!"

"I'll surely lift your roof if you so much as stir or make a whimper before that full hour elapses!"

"Don't make a mistake now, I implore you, Dare devil. I'll be on watch through all, and just so sure as you yield to temptation, just that surely will I sound your last call, through this pretty gun!"

Through the muffler a dint was made in the skin of his forehead, and something warned the Dare-devil Sport that this threat was made in stern resolve but he ventured to ask:

"What have I done that—"

"Button lip, Dare-devil!" rudely interrupted the Unseen. "It isn't a question of what you have done, but of what you are going to do! And that is—for the last time, remember!"

"You're going to lie quiet right here for just one hour by the watch, or else you're going to lose what few brains Dame Nature cursed you with at birth! Now, time!"

Dare Deverell felt all touch removed from his person, and after a brief space he caught the sound of hoof-strokes as his horse was led or ridden away.

Slowly the moments crept along until at least five minutes had passed, without the faintest sound to indicate the presence of this as yet unknown enemy; and believing that he was left alone, Deverell lifted his body toward a sitting posture, the better to do battle with those strong hands.

Scarcely had he made the motion ere a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, forcing him backward once more, that disagreeable voice uttering still less pleasant words of warning:

"Stay put, you fool! One more effort like that and out goes your light! I'm on guard, so bide a wee or hop the twig, my hearty!"

With a final grip by way of emphasis that hand left his person, and Dare Deverell lay quiet, for once in his life feeling curiously cowed.

Then, silently as though each foot was thickly shod in velvet, the layer of that cunning trap moved away from the spot, smiling grimly at his own perfect success thus far.

He tiptoed along to where the confiscated horse was standing, fairly beyond hearing of those securely muffled ears, chuckling softly to himself as he led the animal still further away, muttering as he went:

"Dare-devil or not, it's dollars to cents he wouldn't make a stir just now though a rattler was to play a tail-solo right in his blessed ears! Talk about risk! Why, this is fun—simply fun!"

When full assured that no echo of those iron-shod hoofs could by any possibility convey information to the ears of the hampered Sport, the Unknown sprang nimbly into the saddle, riding briskly along the back trail, only drawing rein when, in his judgment, he had taken that animal to the prudential limit.

"Steady, now, old fellow!" the stranger muttered while hitching the animal to a bush which seemed suitable to his purpose. "You've got your part to play in this little farce, and if you fail me—good by John!"

Giving the intelligent creature a soothing pat in parting, the Unknown passed on his way, pausing again when at one edge of the stage road, here rounding a gentle curve to pass closely in front of the handy cover elected by himself for further usage.

A sweeping glance up and down that road failed to show aught of human life, and when he inclined his head in acute listening, never a sound came his way by way of warning that the nearly due stage was on schedule time.

"Good enough! And here goes to make it better still!" muttered the Unknown, making his final arrangements for the next act in this, his queer drama of real life.

Laying his heavy revolver upon the rock

beside which he had taken his station, he quickly put on the coat and broad leaved hat taken from Dare Deverell, chuckling anew as he briefly viewed his present make-up by the aid of a small pocket-mirror.

"Enough like the devil to be called Satan, anyway! If the rest runs as smoothly—why not? Steady, old man! Yonder she comes, or my ears give false warning!"

Faint and from far-away came the sounds which this Unknown believed heralded the coming of the coach running from Upper-crust to Paradise Park, and taking from an inner pocket a mask fashioned from black cloth, he placed it near the revolver on the rock at his side.

Leaning forward with traces of anxiety now visible in his face, the stranger, clad in the marooned Sport's habiliments, waited and watched, catching his breath more sharply as the on-coming stage soon swung around yonder curve into view.

There was no room for mistaking; the two span of well-built mules, the occupants of box seat and well laden top, all proclaimed the coach for which this man was lying in wait.

Near the driver could be sighted a bit of feminine drapery, and, his last doubts set at rest, the Unknown quickly put on the black mask, thus completely covering his face from sight, leaving naught save garb and shape and curling locks of jetty black hair by which he might be identified.

Crouching there in cunning ambushade, the road-agent waited until the stage was nearly abreast his position; then he rose erect, head and shoulders visible, but plainer than all else the pistol-armed hands with which he backed up his stern challenge:

"Halt! Hands up, one and all!"

As though guided by pure instinct (for he certainly did not take time for thought or reasoning) the driver kicked forward the brake-beam, throwing his weight upon the crutch as well as the ribbons, jerking both leaders and wheelers fairly to their haunches as he cried out:

"Whoa, back—ge-darn an' I'll be—held-up, by gloryation!"

"Steady, all!" came the added warning as cries of surprise broke from the pilgrims aboard, those in sight shrinking visibly. "I've got ye foul, and if you kick, I'll kill! Hands up, I say! And empty, please!"

Besides the young lady who sat shrinkingly by the side of the driver, there were four men riding on top of the stage, to say nothing of those who might be occupying seats inside the clumsy vehicle; yet not one among them all reached for a weapon or made a show of resistance.

The surprise was so complete, those leveled guns looked so terribly business-like, the voice from behind that sable mask spoke in such commanding tones, that all hands instinctively lifted; and after that 'twas too late to think of open resistance.

"This is simple business, gentlemen, and you want to keep that fact clearly in mind," spoke on the road-agent, moving his pistols to cover each shrinking face in turn. "I'm mild as mother's milk and harmless as a sucking dove so long as you let me have my own way; but try to kick over the traces and there'll be work for the coroner and sexton, sure!"

"Don't, boss!" quavered the driver, trying to hold fast to the ribbons and at the same time make an elbow cover both head and person as one of those menacing muzzles turned his way for the moment. "I wouldn't kick ef yer was to pay me for it, an' then, this ye'leddy hain't—"

"That's all right, Johnny Ague-fit, and no harm shall come to the lady so long as she holds her hush. I'm after the gelt, mind ye, all!"

"Oh, Lord!" came a quavering wail from the perch above the well-laden boot. "Robbers! Thieves! Oh, let me go—let me go before—"

"Button that lip, pardner, or I'll sink a mineral shaft clean through where you live!" harshly cut in the road agent, stepping more wholly out of ambush, like one who feels fairly assured against trouble from any source. "Tumble down off that seat, you howler!"

"Oh, Lord! To think that I should meet with such a—don't shoot! For love of kind heaven, dear sir, don't—don't murder me!"

"Take a tumble, Daddy Shakes, or I'll do worse than that; I'll sew up your lips and let you explode through an overplus of gas! Down, I say, you idiot!"

Shivering until his yellow-stained teeth fairly played an irregular tune, the unfortunate pilgrim obeyed, reaching earth upon hands and feet, but scrambling nervously upright as that armed robber spoke again.

"Rise up, Daddy Quivers! I don't believe you're half as big a donkey as you look, and—steady, all!"

Evidently this cool hand was determined not to be caught off his guard, and great though the numerical odds were against him, he seemed fully capable of holding his own with a trifle "up his sleeve" to meet unexpected emergencies.

"Mind you, gentlemen, all," he added, voice sounding dangerously cool and smooth the while. "It isn't often that I repeat a warning in cases like this, but, really, you look such a happy family that 'twould be a howling pity to count even a single link out of the chain. So, easy, all!"

"No man can run this road without paying fair toll, so long as I am filling the office of tax-gatherer. This is the place, now is the accepted time, and I am the agent!"

"No physical harm shall be done to any one of you, so long as you come to Limerick without too much reluctance; but if I have to—well, I've already three graveyards started, and I'd just as soon make it four if you insist!"

"Oh, sir, I'm a poor man, and surely you wouldn't rob—"

"Shut up, you!" turning fiercely toward the cringing wretch on his own level once more. "Follow orders, Daddy Shakes, and maybe you'll get off all the more lightly for it!"

"Thanks! Oh, sir, if you only knew—"

With a swift motion the road-agent tapped those quivering lips with the muzzle of a revolver, effectually silencing the trembling passenger for the time being.

"Those inside the hearse will step out, one by one, hands empty and showing through the door on this side first of all," commanded the road-agent, evidently bent on taking no necessary chances, dare-devil though he surely was.

"If I glimpse so much as rock, stock or barrel of a gun, I'll turn both hearse and contents into a riddle! Last warning, and every word of it right fresh from the law-and-gospel shop! Now, emerge, gentlemen!"

In slow and reluctant procession the inside passengers made their appearance, three in number, and one of whom the road-agent seemed to recognize, since he called out in chaffing tones:

"Hellow, Andy o' the Forge! You're one of the suckers caught in my pretty little net, are you?"

"An' who in thunder mought you be?" growlingly demanded the burly blacksmith, whose calling seemed written all over his grimy face and person as well.

"Incognito, just at present, my dear Mr. Hammer," mocked the robber, as his right hand gun kept time with those movements. "Line up, please! Don't crowd, nor step on each others' toes, or my fellows across the way— Keep 'em well under cover, lads!"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the weasen lawyer, Simon Whitehead by name, who stood in fear and trembling the while. "More of 'em coming! We'll be murdered like— Yes, sir, please, sir!"

CHAPTER III.

A SHOT SENT HOME.

ONCE again that ready bit of metal came into play, and quelled by the fear of death, Simon Whitehead shivered in silence save for his faintly clicking teeth.

"Never mind looking around, gents," sharply added the road-agent. "I can do all in that line that is necessary, and my fine lads will come in evidence plenty quick when the right cue is given. Now, driver?"

"Yes, boss!"

"Hold all level while the rest of your live stock climbs down to line up with these ducks! Steady, sirs! Don't turn this little picnic into a funeral procession, I beg of you!"

One by one the passengers alighted,

ranging in line with those from the interior, all moving like clockwork under those guiding muzzles.

"So far, so good!" commented the road-agent. "Now, Johnny-on-the-box, one word in your nigh ear; where's the treasure-chest stowed away this trip?"

"They hain't none along, boss, fer—"

"Careful! I'd hate like sin to waste a good cartridge on such game as you, Johnny, but, where's that chest?"

"Hope may die ef I know of ar'y sech, boss!" doggedly repeated the driver, flinching from that menacing muzzle, yet seemingly forced to run that risk. "Thar hain't even no sort o' Express, nuther, boss."

"If you're trying to lie me out of my just dues—"

"Lord knows I hain't, boss! Why should I, then? I'm paid fer doin' the drivin', not fer guardin' treasure-boxes an' sech like. An' so, ef thar's ar'y sech treasure aboard, folks done stowed it away afore I come on duty; so help me, Moses!"

The road-agent seemed greatly taken aback by this dogged assertion, and for some moments stood like one in doubt as to the next step to be taken.

Then he rallied, speaking sharply and tapping the shivering lawyer on a shoulder by way of pointing his election:

"Go through that hearse, Daddy Shivers! Look for a treasure-chest, and don't let it cheat your eyes. I'll strip your mangy hide off to hang on the fence if you fail to strike pay-dirt!"

With a muffled whine the luckless lawyer obeyed, so far as rummaging through the boot and the interior of the coach, but wholly without success, making his report in outward fear and trembling, seemingly expecting a shot or knife-thrust by way of penalty for non-success.

If the road-agent was seriously discomfited by this failure, that sable mask concealed all facial signs, and though there came a sterner, less playful echo to his voice when he spoke again, he let that point drop once for all.

"So much the worse for your individual pockets, gentlemen! With the treasure-chest I expected, you might have run this gantlet with no more serious loss than a bit of self-glory; but now—steady, all!"

"I say, Daddy Trembler!"

"Lord save us! Please, sir, I never—"

"But you will, all the same, Father Nerves," ruthlessly cut in he of the hidden face. "You look like a sober deacon, just out of a job, and so—catch, Granny Whiner!"

With a deft movement the robber produced a stout canvas sack from somewhere about his person, giving it a toss which caused it to alight fairly in those skinny paws, then adding:

"Pass the contribution-box, Deacon Doleful! Take the gents in rotation, and don't skip a single person, on your life! Smile your sweetest, talk your prettiest, Deacon Dumps, for if any one refuses to contribute, the requisite amount comes out of your blessed pocket!"

"And you, gents, pray come down with a good grace when the chance offers itself. Just imagine you're contributing to the heathen, and it won't be half so much like drawing eye-teeth! Now—go the rounds, please, Deacon Doleful!"

Simon Whitehead obeyed with what grace he could summon, while the present chief of ceremonies leaned with apparent carelessness against the gray rock which had formed a portion of his ambush, yet all the time holding his revolvers in readiness for use if required.

So admirably did he play his part that, though never a glimpse had been caught of other force to back him up in this dare-devil exploit, hardly one of the passengers doubted the fact of his having a strong reserve force in waiting.

One after another they contributed to the fund as Simon Whitehead passed along the line, dropping their valuables into the sack his skinny fingers manipulated the while.

A curious sight, truly, yet one not without its parallel in Western annals, where a single cool-headed, iron-nerved desperado strips of their valuables an entire stage-load of lusty, well-armed pilgrims!

Pale and agitated, yet hardly for herself, the single woman passenger kept her seat beside the driver, her eyes roving from robber to robbed, lingering longest upon one passenger in particular—tall, gray-haired, seemingly far from strong or sound of health just then.

"For my sake, Uncle Carroll!" she said, when the impressed lawyer came to this individual. "Don't—pray don't! If aught should happen to—Spare him, please, sir!"

For the first time since that collection began, the road-agent gave evidence of interest, rising erect and stepping forward a pace, one pistol rising to touch that slouched brim in salute as he spoke:

"All right, lady! Touch him lightly, deacon, please! But as for the rest of you, come down right smart, or I'll have to go through your clothes my own self; and that always calls for double pay; in red, if not in yellow, green or white stuff!"

There was no more room left for doubting his meaning, and the sack was none the lighter for that grimly significant warning when Simon Whitehead reached the last man in line, then turned toward the road-agent to render an account of his stewardship.

Evidently the masked robber felt content with what had been contributed, having kept tally with keen eyes during that slow movement down the line, for he received the sack without investigating its contents, stuffing it into one wide side-pocket, then coolly speaking:

"All right, Daddy Shakes! Now for your personal contribution, please."

The lawyer started and half turned as though to seek safety in flight, but that ominous clicking checked his rash movement.

"Steady, fool! Don't make me spoil a neat job by daubing it all over with red paint! Come, I say! Shell out or croak!"

"But I haven't—I'm a poor old man, sir! I'm almost a beggar! I have only a dollar or two—barely sufficient to keep me from starvation while—And my poor, wandering boy!"

"Never mind your boy, deacon, but shell out!"

"Oh, kind sir! Don't rob me in my old age! Don't! I've barely enough to live in Paradise for a week while searching for my poor boy, who has—Oh, let me go—let me go!"

With one gun covering the other passengers, the road-agent grasped that shivering, shrinking shape, then swiftly wrested a plump pocketbook from where it nestled closely in that hollow bosom, laughing exultantly as he drew back a bit, to utter in mocking tones:

"Ha! ha! ha! Starving is it? Why, you bloated bondholder! Right here's enough wealth to keep—Quiet, fool!"

With a frenzied shriek of mingled despair and hatred, Simon Whitehead fairly flung himself at the throat of the robber, skinny claws working like wild beast talons; but, with hardly a visible effort, he was beaten back and crushed to earth, held there by one heavily-pressing boot while the road-agent covered the other passengers with two guns, sharply crying out the warning:

"Steady, all! Touch a weapon and I kill! Riddle 'em, lads, if they try to make a break!"

It was well, no doubt, that he spoke and acted so sharply, for already that line was wavering, and the loss of a moment might well have brought on a fight which could hardly have ended without bloodshed and death.

As it was, the masked footpad still held the key of the situation, and even Simon Whitehead contented himself with groaning and whining beneath that crushing foot.

A few moments thus in order to make sure all was well, then the road-agent spurned the lawyer, speaking sharply:

"Quit your whimpering, fool, or still worse shall befall you! And now, gentlemen, one word before bidding you fare-well!"

"I was led to believe this stage held a fortune, and if my hopes had panned out according to schedule, never a man among ye all would have been a dollar out! But a

gent of my caliber really can't afford to put in his time for nothing!"

"Then we kin go on, boss?" asked the driver, quickly.

"Don't you get in an unhealthy rush, Johnny Ribbons! Wait until I—beg your pardon, sir," with a slight nod toward the gray-haired passenger whom the young lady appeared to feel such a powerful interest in. "Your name is?"

"Pope Carroll, sir," came the crisp reply, and the speaker stepped forward as though drawn out of line by the power of those glittering eyes, so uncertainly seen through the holes in that cloth covering. "And you are—surely you are—"

"No person you know, or met before!" swiftly interposed the road-agent, recolling a bit as though taken aback by the unexpected address. "I never even heard of you, sir! I only meant—"

As he recoiled, one hand flew back as though to hold that mask in place the more securely, but instead of that, the fastening came undone and the mask fell, leaving that boldly handsome face exposed to view for a few seconds!

Mr. Carroll stared, then gave a husky cry of mingled surprise and sorrow as he came still nearer, hands flying forth as if to grasp the owner of that face.

"Oh, Dare! Oh, my poor, misguided boy!"

With a savage curse the road-agent recoiled, slipping mask into place again, then firing point-blank at the agitated passenger!

With a sharp cry Pope Carroll staggered back, flinging up his arms as he turned unsteadily around, then falling heavily forward upon his face with limbs all a quiver as if in death-agony!

A shriek from the young woman upon the box-seat; cries and oaths from the startled passengers in line; a further recoil on part of the now red-handed road-agent, then—still worse!

Like one who had wholly lost his nerve for the time being, the outflow opened fire in reckless fashion, at the same time backing away until out of the road, then turning in swift flight, heading for the spot where the confiscated horse had been left in waiting.

And before those startled pilgrims could fairly rally to act in concert, or even bethink themselves of their weapons, he was gone, leaving only the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs to guide the chase.

For chase was now made, and Simon Whitehead was foremost in it!

"My money! Oh, never let him escape with—my money! my money!"

In frantic haste the weazen lawyer rushed in that direction, and as men will do, the other passengers followed their scarcely worthy leader, and one and all crying aloud for swift vengeance upon that dastardly assassin.

For even now there came a wail of heart-rending sorrow to their ears from near the stage, where Noreen Carroll was kneeling beside the bleeding body of her poor uncle.

As the rush came to the next curve in the trail, a glimpse was had of the fleeing robber, and Andrew Hammer, the blacksmith, came to a halt through pure amazement, crying out in hoarse tones:

"Holy smoke o' sacrifice. That hoss! It's Dare Deverell, for rocks! I know, fer—that's his hoss, an' I kin take my oath to it, too!"

CHAPTER IV.

WHO WAS THE CRIMINAL?

ALMOST frantic with grief, Noreen Carroll knelt beside her uncle as he lay upon the stony ground, blood flowing freely from a shot through his left shoulder.

Apparently he was already past human aid, eyes closed and face ashy, limbs lying limp and nerveless; but as the hot tears from those loving eyes dropped upon the face her lips were agitatedly kissing, Pope Carroll gave a fluttering sigh, and Noreen knew that life was not yet wholly extinct.

"Help! Oh, sir!" she made appeal, turning toward the driver, who, until then, found his hands full controlling his startled mules. "Can't you do something for my poor, poor uncle?"

"Sech a p'izen mux as this! Ef I ever—whoa-ap, critters!"

The driver swung his leaders around until they faced the rock and bushes out of which the dare-devil road-agent had sprung his ambush, then wound lines around the brake-beam which he had shoved forward to the last notch.

Having thus taken all precautions against an untimely runaway, honest Dick McBride clambered down from his perch, ready to lend a suffering mortal what aid and assistance might lie in his power.

Fortunately for poor Noreen, McBride had had more or less experience with gunshot wounds, and after a hasty yet fairly thorough examination, he gave her much needed assurance:

"Tain't nigh so bad as I thunk, ma'am, an' ef he don't—"

"Then it isn't—he isn't—dead?" faltered the maiden, scarcely daring to hope, even yet.

"Dead? Lord love ye, ma'am! He'll git all over it like a micer!" came the glad assurance as McBride flung out a grimy hand in emphasis. "Take him a week from now, say, an' he'll hev to think right smart to 'member as how he ever was hurt! Ef not, then I'm a blamed ole liar from 'way up the crick!"

Richard certainly meant well, but just now he was so plainly overdoing the matter that his assurance produced just the contrary to the effect he was aiming after.

Noreen fell to sobbing, tears falling rapidly, although she strove bravely to smother her emotions while bending over that prostrate form.

Still, Pope Carroll was far from being a dead man, and as, little by little, that awful benumbing shock lost its power, he showed unmistakable signs of rallying, finally lifting his head and even trying to rise to a sitting posture as he huskily muttered:

"Dare—her boy! I never—forgive—"

"Oh, Uncle Pope!"

"Stiddy, boss!" at the same time warned the kindly old driver, one hand lending that unsteady head support as he added: "I wouldn't try fer to do too much, now, fer—stiddy, sir!"

With a hollow groan those lids closed and shiveringly the wounded man slipped head away from that kindly hand, faintly muttering:

"Don't—leave me—Noreen, darling!"

"I am here, uncle. If I can—oh, why did this happen!"

"I knew—the eyes—so like her dear eyes, child!"

Noreen shrunk away, giving a painful gasp of mingled grief and indignation before murmuring in her turn:

"Oh, uncle! Surely not—you are wrong—all wrong, dear! It was not—it surely could not be—he!"

"I know—from the very first word I knew the voice and— Oh, my poor, misguided boy!"

Pope Carroll broke off with a shivering groan, but instinctively the maiden slipped a soft palm over his bearded lips, like one deeming it best to smother the words which might seek exit, at the same time turning an uneasy glance toward the stage-driver.

Honest Dick McBride had been looking and listening, both, but now he flushed hotly as he turned away, muttering something about those blamed contrary mules!

Noreen saw her uncle paling visibly, and felt him shiver beneath her warning touch, and once more beginning to fear the worst, she called out in her excess of grief:

"Oh, sir! Can't something be done for him? He is—surely he must have aid from—the doctor?"

"Waal, ma'am, I do reckon the highest place sech help as that kin be found is at Paradise, an' so—ef you'll jest sort o' chirk him up a weenty bit, while I'm a doin' of it, ye see, I'll jist rig a sort o' purchase which'll be— We kin tote him inside, on the quishions, ma'am, jest like a micer!"

McBride fell to work arranging the interior for the reception of the wounded passenger, and Noreen tried all she could to soothe her injured relative.

To all seeming he was seriously if not fatally wounded, yet Pope Carroll was suffering far more in mind than in body, just then.

There was much which passed his lips

which could scarcely be understood by his niece, even, but sufficient was let fall to give the poor girl a worse heart-ache than had been hers for many a long day.

"Oh, no!" moaned the wounded man, moving restlessly under her kindly ministrations. "Those eyes! Her eyes, Noreen! I would know them among a thousand pair! And then—that face—his face, child!"

"You thought so, dear, because you have been thinking of him so long and so steadily," explained the maiden, striving to make herself believe in her own arguments, though hardly with complete success. "It was not—it surely could not be—Dare!"

"If I could only think that way, child! If I only could!"

"You must, because 'tis truth, uncle!"

"No, no, dear! I know—I saw! Her idol, and now—she dying, while he is— Oh, why must it be thus?" with a husky groan of mental agony. "Her son—a criminal like this! And I—my stern injustice drove him from home and heart to—to this!"

Grief seemed to still further weaken the old gentleman, and his lamentations died away to an inarticulate, broken whisper, too faint for even those loving ears to follow correctly.

And thus it was when the men who had set forth in such hot haste, upon an utterly hopeless chase, returned to the stage, without a prisoner yet not entirely unrewarded.

In one strong hand Andrew Hammer, the Paradise worker in iron, gripped a horse-shoe, to which several bent nails still clung; and when Dick McBride hailed them, this token was uplifted with an angry shake in air.

"Naw, we hain't ketched him, but we've got this!" growled the blacksmith, surlily.

"A hoss-shoe, is it?"

"An' one o' my own turnin', too, wuss luck!"

"Holy Moses in the bullrushes!" exploded the driver, reading more in face and tone than had been put into words, as yet. "Shorely you don't mean fer to say that—Not one o' our people, Andy Hammer?"

"Dare Deverell, no less!" harshly exploded another of the returned chasers, scowling blackly as he stood with hands plunged deep into his recently-emptied pockets.

"Oh, git out!"

"I hain't gwine jest that fur, mind ye, now, Dick McBride," slowly and deliberately added the blacksmith, holding that bit of wrought iron up to full view of them all. "But this much I'm open fer to say in the naked face o' the hull durned world:

"I turned this shoe. I driv' them nails. I see the hoss as cast it 'long the trail, back yonder. An' this much more I do say:

"I turned this shoe fer Dare Deverell. I drive them nails in this shoe, on the hoss owned an' rid by Dare Deverell. That was his hoss we see, over yender, an' the rider was—who?"

His lips closed firmly, his eyes glanced from face to face, but not one of them all seemed willing to repeat the name which was foremost in each and every mind.

For Noreen Carroll, face flushed with indignation, eyes fairly flashing as she sprung to her feet with uplifted hand, just then cried forth:

"For shame, gentlemen! How dare you defame an honest gentlemen like Dare Deverell while he—his poor, dying uncle!"

Woman-like, she broke down, and again knelt beside her suffering relative, sobbing and muttering, she scarcely knew what.

Then, man-like, not another word was spoken against the one they all must have felt guilty of both robbery and attempted murder, while all lent what assistance lay in their power toward caring for the injured passenger and his more than fair guardian angel.

The stage was turned into a pretty fair ambulance, and with Andrew Hammer and another pale passenger inside to assist in guarding Mr. Carroll from jolting, the interrupted journey was resumed, Noreen holding a hand and whispering soothing words to her uncle the while.

No further interruption was met with by the way, and not so very long afterward they came in sight of Paradise Park, Dick

McBride tooling his team far more gently and carefully than ever before in their experience on that route.

Contrary to the usual custom, no halt was made until the stage drew up in front of the main hotel in that bustling little mining-town, where its coming was greeted by a long-haired, smooth-faced young man who acted like one on the lookout for expected friends.

And so it proved to be, for Noreen gave a little cry of mingled joy and pain as she caught sight of that familiar face and figure, saying:

"Oh, Tracy! Don't be scared dear, but uncle is— Oh, dear!"

A very poor attempt at breaking the startling tidings, it must be confessed, but this was the poor child's first experience in wild life, and her physical powers had already been severely strained.

Tracy Carroll gave a hoarse exclamation as he saw his father in such a sad plight, looking more dead than alive.

"Who done this foul deed?" the young man cried, flashing a fierce look around, even while reaching inside the stage to support the sufferer. "Who harmed my father, I say?"

Pope Carroll opened his heavy lids, trying to smile as he recognized that face; but then he groaned in mental misery, huskily muttering:

"Don't—oh, let me die! Poor boy! Her idol, and now—I drove him to sin and criminal acts through my harsh— Oh, Dare—Dare!"

"Hush! Oh, dear uncle, don't say— He is wandering in mind, cousin, and don't know what words pass his poor lips!" Noreen agitatedly said in explanation, as Tracy briefly recoiled.

Only for an instant; then those strong arms lent his father aid, and, assisted by Andrew Hammer, he bore the wounded man from stage to hotel, only pausing when the injured man was safely deposited upon a bed in the upper story, where a fair sized chamber had been engaged for his coming by the thoughtful son.

"Care for him, Noreen," the cousin said to the maiden, fairly pushing the blacksmith out of the chamber, now his aid was no longer required for aught. "I'm going for a doctor, and—"

"Oh, hurry—hurry, Tracy! If he should—oh, uncle, dear, don't—I beg of you not to—to leave us like—like this!"

Tracy Carroll was unusually pale, just then, but his dark blue eyes were gleaming with a vengeful fire as he spoke again:

"I'll not be gone longer than I must to find medical aid, Noreen. And then—but time enough, after father's cared for!"

He left the chamber, running swiftly down the stairs at the heels of the more sluggish blacksmith, but, fortunately for the sufferer above, the son's mission had been in goodly measure anticipated.

"Here's the doctor, now!" cried a friendly voice, as a bustling little shape came hurrying to the front. "How is he, sir?"

"Badly off, I fear, but I'll avenge him if I can find out who—"

"Dare Deverell shot him and robbed us all!" fairly squealed a high-pitched voice, as Simon Whitehead pushed to the front.

Tracy Carroll recoiled like one dealt a stinging blow in the face.

"A lie! My cousin never— Bah! You're either crazy or drunk, fool!"

CHAPTER V.

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM.

MEANWHILE, how fared it with the genuine Dare Deverell?

After that last grim warning, showing how closely his every movement was being watched, the Sport from Paradise Park lay quiet, seemingly resigned to the inevitable.

Quiet in body, that is; but with brain busily working, with every mental energy taxed to the utmost trying to get at the bottom facts of this unique adventure.

Why had so much trouble been taken on his account?

If all this was the work of an avowed enemy—and surely no friend would have taken such nasty methods of winning a point—why had he not been shot down in his tracks, thus ending all at a single stroke?

Doesn't he know that those scattered

coins of yellow metal had been spread in his path the more surely to entrap him—to what? That the golden lure was intended to make him an easier prey.

Who could that unseen enemy be? And what object could he have in view which required such extraordinary methods as these?

From start to finish 'twas all a bewildering puzzle, and as he lay there in bonds, Dare Deverell strove in vain to catch a clue to the truth.

That voice!

Strive as he might, the Sport failed to recall any human being who possessed just such another: harsh, croaking, unnatural.

Disguised, no doubt; but even that lent no light to the puzzling enigma.

After all, was it anything worse than a rough jest? Might it not be the reckless work of a practical joker, thinking by these means to play even with him for some real or fancied offense?

A stinging pain shot through his bruised if not lacerated scalp at this, and Dare Deverell gave a subdued growl, further muffled by the thick sack drawn over his head and face.

"An infernally tough joke, and that's a fact! One that I'd heap-sight rather reward with a kick than a kiss, too! But—if in sober earnest, what can the fellow hope to gain through it all?"

There was the point!

Hardly for plunder, although the Unknown had taken hat, coat, and brace of valuable revolvers from the Sport; but even as he lay thus comparatively helpless, Dare Deverell could feel the fairly well lined wallet lying securely in his breast pocket.

If simple robbery, why was that money left him?

If not for plunder, why had those other articles been taken?

"To play he was me?" the Sport asked himself, with an involuntary start at the thought. "What for? And how? I can't think—unless—was it Knox Bassett?"

That thought fairly thrilled the bound man, for it seemed to open up a fresh vista; and as one before a mirror he recalled the face and figure of the man who owned the name still warm upon his lips: gambler, all-around-sport, fire-eater, idol and pattern for the roughs and toughs so easily found in all mining-towns after the order of Paradise Park.

Deverell knew that a more or less strong resemblance existed between Knox Bassett and himself, for others had mentioned it on more than one occasion of late; but never until now had he given that real or fancied resemblance more than an idle thought in passing.

Now—could it be?

"Is he trying to play my double, to get me into trouble? Or—the stage! A hold-up! And—is that the way of it, wonder?"

Something of the actual truth flashed upon that busy brain as by intuition, only to be rejected as quickly.

The bare idea seemed too wild, too far-fetched, too utterly preposterous for even momentary credence, and Dare Deverell gave a snort of disgust at his own folly.

"Get out, man! You're growing wild—clean lunny, boy! Even Knox Bassett wouldn't have sand to play such a dirty trick as that! And yet—who else? And what is it all for, anyway?"

So it was; his puzzled thought ran in a circle, ever returning to that same sticking point.

Then, indistinct and muffled by the sack drawn so closely about his head, Dare Deverell caught the sounds of distant firing, and though that brief journey in total darkness had confused his sense of location, he instinctively divined the truth; the firing came from some point along the stage-road, and the coach from Upper-crust was being held up!

"My guns, too, or I've lost my ears!" the hampered Sport exploded, trying to spring to his feet, but falling back again with painful force. "That cunning devil is—playing my double, by thunder!"

He seemed to see it all, now, and the truth almost took his breath away for the first few seconds.

Almost surely a "hold-up," and if his hat and coat should be recognized—

"And I rode past the outfit myself only an hour ago!"

Another start as Dare Deverell seemed to look still deeper into that satanically cunning plot.

He had passed the stage not so many miles beyond the point where he found that golden lure spread to catch his eyes and hold his attention until that as yet unrecognized enemy could fairly spring the trap.

He had been hailed by the driver, and had tipped his hat in polite recognition of the fair pilgrim adorning the box. And now—

"Shooting, too! And that means wounds or killing! And that—the rope!" muttered Deverell, as he lay listening with painfully-strained senses for a brief space.

No further sounds came to his ears, however, and he knew that all was over, one way or the other.

If it really was a case of "hold-up," which he could scarcely doubt when taking everything into consideration, the dare-devil robber had carried his point, or else had been repulsed by armed passengers.

If the last, and those shots had done their work right well, matters would be easily adjusted; the dead man's identity would be recognized, and that would clear his skirts!

"But, if he did the shooting? If he killed, then racked out? How am I to come in at the finish?"

That was a far from comfortable thought, and for a brief space Dare Deverell actually bethought himself of hurrying from thence to more healthy regions; but the idea was even more swiftly rejected.

"Don't you begin to think it, now! I'll face the music if it takes a hind leg off—or telescopes my neck long enough for a flag-staff!"

So resolving, the Paradise Sport wasted no further time, but bent all his energies toward breaking or slipping his cunningly-applied bonds.

That proved to be by no means a trifling task, and for a long time Deverell struggled in vain, making so little progress that any one less gifted with courage and persistence would have given over in despair.

"You've got to, just got to, old man!" he muttered, doggedly, twisting and wrenching, straining and striving all the more vigorously.

At length his reward came, those stubborn thongs giving way before his vigorous efforts until, at the cost of an inch or two of skin, he fairly slipped one hand free!

After that the rest easily followed, though his first use of the liberated member was to tear away that smothering hoodwink.

So long blinded, the bright sun caused Deverell to wink and blink rapidly for a brief space, but as he grew more accustomed to the change, he sought on all sides for some sign of his entrapper; but in vain.

That mysterious personage was nowhere to be seen, but had taken his departure without leaving so much as a single clew behind.

Tearing off those still clinging bonds from his left hand, Deverell cut his feet free with pocket knife, then rose to his feet, a bit uncertainly at first, thanks to his impeded circulation.

He sought on all sides for some clue by which he might settle the identity of that adroit trapper. All in vain; but, grimly resolved to play his part to the end like a whiteman, as he himself expressed it, Deverell pressed on to the stage-road, hatless, coatless, unarmed and certainly in poor condition to encounter a prepared foe.

He found the spot where the hold-up must have taken place, for all about were foot prints, and yonder was the half-effaced mark made by a human body prostrate in the gritty dust with—

"Blood!" exclaimed Deverell, as he bent over that significant sign to make all sure. "Some person caught it, and caught it hard, from that!"

There was nothing else to show him what had been the outcome, save the tracks of the wheels leading toward Paradise Park; and after a brief pause for reflection, the Sport pressed along in that same direction, muttering to himself:

"Fun ahead, I do reckon! But I'll never run away from wrongs my hand and head had no part in shaping; so here goes, for better or for worse!"

The shades of night were beginning to fall ere the entrapped Sport succeeded in shaking off his bonds, and it was fair twilight when he bent over those blood-marks; so, let him make what haste he might, the night had set in for some little time before he caught sight of the twinkling lights marking the location of Paradise Park.

Thus far Dare Deverell had not met any person by the way, and was fairly inside the town-limits ere he was recognized; then a passing man halted in his front, uttering a low, excited cry as he blurted forth:

"You, Deverell? Are you gone clean crazy, man alive? If the gang should smoke you now—"

"What's biting you, pardner?" curtly cut in the Sport. "I live here, don't I, Daniels?"

"Yes, but—you'll die here, too, unless—Rack out, Dare-devil, if you love your neck! They're already talking of lynch-law to fit your case! Rack out, or—"

"Why should I turn tail, pray? What have I done to flee from?"

"What! Don't you know—"

"I know that I've done nothing to be lynched for. What are you trying to get through you, anyway, pardner?" firmly demanded the Sport.

Daniels came a bit closer, hand on shoulder while staring keenly into that face, all the more open to inspection through the lack of a hat.

"Didn't you hold up the stage and shoot the pilgrim, Deverell?"

"No, I did not. Who says I did, pardner?"

"Everybody, almost! And they'll rope you, sure, man, unless you skip out in a holy hurry!"

"Well, you keep out of the mix, Daniels, and nobody'll hurt you," was the Dare-devil Sport's retort, shaking off that friendly hand and striding swiftly away through the deepening gloom.

Not in flight, however, but heading directly for the hotel at which he had rooms. And finding no person inconveniently near that little side-door, Deverell slipped inside and ran lightly up to the second floor, where he succeeded in entering his own chamber without being seen.

Here he swiftly cared for his person, putting on clean clothes and removing as far as might be all traces of his recent adventure, then giving a brief, low laugh as he looked to the workings of a brace of revolvers before stowing them away on his person, out of sight yet convenient to his hands in case of urgent necessity.

"Lynch-law, eh?" he muttered, moving toward the door when his preparations were fairly complete. "Stretch my neck for holding up the stage, is it? And—who am I to hang for? That's what bothers me worst!"

"If I could only meet up with him—the fellow who looks like me; if I could only find him, first, I'd gladly chance the rest!"

"As it is—well, they do say hanging's a tough death, but I'll take it rather than turn tail and run for a crime I never even thought of committing! So, here's your victim, gentlemen!"

Opening the door, Dare Deverell passed down-stairs and outside.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DARE-DEVIL SPORT OR HIS DOUBLE.

LIKE one deeming him worthy no further notice, Tracy Carroll pushed Simon Whitehead away, turning to the puffing little man of medicine, asking him to bear him company, adding:

"I fear my father is badly injured, sir, but do all you can for him and you may name your own reward if you save his life!"

"Don't mention it, sir, I beg of you!" wheezed the asthmatic physician, making what haste lay in his power as Tracy led the way. "It's part of my sacred profession to—huh-huh!—to aid in—ugh!"

Partly turning young Carroll grasped an arm, and assisted the man of medicine up those stairs far more rapidly than Dr. Hooper had ever climbed before, landing him on the threshold of the sick-chamber literally out of breath, gasping like a fish out of water.

But professional instinct is strong, and though he might not be able to "heal himself," still Dr. Hooper was a good man and true so far as his capabilities went.

Pope Carroll moaned under his ministrations, but it seemed more in mental agony than in physical, for he muttered restlessly of his poor boy, of *her* dear eyes, *her* broken heart; then fell to cursing his own hard head and cruel heart for driving the lad to wrong doing.

The cousins interchanged uneasy glances at this, and presently Tracy took it upon himself to speak in low tones to the physician:

"Don't mind what he's saying, poor dad! He believes 'twas Dare Deverell who shot him, and— If I could only help you, father!"

Dr. Hooper nodded his comprehension, but was too busy investigating that hurt for idle words.

Having satisfied himself on that point, first of all, he spoke in clear, decisive tones:

"There is little to be dreaded from this wound, if only his mind can be kept at ease. A clear perforation; no bones broken, no vital spot encroached upon! If we can keep the fever down, he will be out of danger by this time to-morrow; upon his feet in less than a fortnight!"

The patient groaned dismally at this, but the cousins brightened up wonderfully at the glad assertion.

They lent Dr. Hooper such assistance as lay in their power, and the worthy doctor retired, for the time being, with a heavier fee in his pocket than he had received for many a long day—if ever before!

Tracy Carroll briefly left the room to answer kindly curiosity as to the condition of the wounded man but quickly returned to the chamber where Noreen was vainly striving to soothe the patient until the sleeping potion administered by the doctor could take full effect.

Pope Carroll seemed stronger than he had at any time since receiving that shot, but 'twas a far from healthy strength; his eyes glittered brightly, his cheeks bore a hectic flush, and his words sounded more like raving than before.

Again and again he fiercely denied that Dare—*her* dear boy!—could or would do such a foul deed as this; and in the next breath he cursed himself for having by cruel injustice driven the poor boy to evil courses and wrong-doing.

"But I never knew! I never thought 'twas right—I did think so!" he moaned, head turning restlessly from side to side, as though that rumpled pillow scorched his flesh. "Oh, Dare! Oh, my poor, poor boy! Why did you do it? Why did you— He never! I swear it wasn't— Oh, Dare, Dare!"

Tracy began to frown more darkly as he listened, but his brows grew a bit lighter as he saw Noreen shake her head positively. And as the wounded man seemed to drop into a brief doze, the maiden spoke, lowly:

"It is all wrong, cousin! All a cruel mistake! Dare never did this awful thing; I know it—I do know it wasn't poor Dare!"

"I'd hate to even think it could be, Noreen," answered her cousin, brows gathered as if in deep and troubled thought. "True, I haven't learned so very much concerning him since coming out here, but that little hardly comports with his character as so gathered. Did you see his face, Noreen?"

The maiden hesitated a moment, then admitted that she had caught a glimpse of the features thus revealed when the black mask fell.

"But I don't think—I never saw enough to—to swear by," she added. "And it has been so long since I last saw Cousin Dare, that I wouldn't— But I feel that it couldn't be he, Tracy!"

The younger Carroll made no reply to this bit of feminine logic, for his father once more roused up, seeming more nearly his usual self, though still flushed and feverish as to eyes.

He recognized his son, and then asked him what success?

"Well, father, you know the word I sent?"

"That you had found him—her poor boy—yes! And—he is here? I can—can see him, Tracy?"

"As soon as you are strong enough,

father," soothingly, at the same time making a warning gesture toward Noreen which could not be seen by the patient. "If you would only sleep a bit—"

"I think—yes, I really do—feel sleepy," drowsily murmured Mr. Carroll, shifting his head slightly, lids drooping heavily.

That soothing powder was beginning to produce the intended effect, and for some little time the cousins sat there in perfect silence; almost fearing to draw a full breath lest that dangerous excitement should again be awakened in their loved one.

But, later on, when the low, regular breathing assured them that Mr. Carroll was actually sleeping, Tracy ventured to give Noreen more information than he had as yet had an opportunity of doing.

It was through word sent by him that Pope Carroll and Noreen had taken this journey, with Paradise Park as their destination; just for what purpose will be made sufficiently clear, ere long.

"I waited until I felt perfectly sure there could be no mistake," the young man went on, tossing back his long, yellow locks. "I could not afford to take any chances, you know, for poor father—disappointment now would be terribly hard for him to bear up under!"

"Yes. He takes it all so deeply to heart since discovering his mistake. But about Dare?"

"Yes. I found him, here. Found him leading a rather reckless life, as you may imagine when I tell you that a favorite nickname for him in Paradise Park is—what think?"

"Nothing really bad, cousin?"

"Well, not exactly; only—er—rather tough, you know! They all call him Dare-devil Sport, partly by way of playing on his name, of course. And yet—well, the truth must be told, after all!"

"Is it so bad, then, Tracy?"

"Not but what it might have been worse," with a faint smile by way of reassurance. "Dare has made his living by playing cards—"

"Not a gambler, surely?"

"Well, girlie, don't forget that gambling is an art, rather than a crime—an accomplishment, rather than a detriment, out in this country," answered the young man, in half-quizzical explanation. "And I will add this much: everybody I've heard speak about it at all, unhesitatingly credits Dare Deverell with being a dead-square Sport; and higher compliment than that no man can win out here!"

In spite of all this, Noreen seemed depressed by the information vouchsafed, and Tracy deemed it wisest to drop the subject for the time being.

As Mr. Carroll appeared to be sleeping peacefully, his son in a whisper bade Noreen watch at the bedside until he could return, then slipped noiselessly out of the room, passing down-stairs to the combination bar and office of the hotel, where he found a number of patrons present, among them Simon Whitehead, the withered-up-looking lawyer.

This person's attention seemed wholly taken up by a tall, neatly-garbed gentleman of something like one score and a half years, whose neatly-trimmed mustaches, snowy linen, silk hat and fashionably cut garments proclaimed one of two things: that he who wore them all must be a wealthy "tender-foot," fresh from the East, or else a gambler!

The last proved to be the case, for he stepped nearer as Tracy leaned against the polished bar to call for a cocktail, and spoke, easily:

"Good-evening, Mr. Carroll! Your father is doing well, I trust?"

"As well as could be expected, Mr. Bassett," coldly answered the young man, his face seeming still colder, if possible, as he gazed keenly into that handsome visage. "Your face is wondrously like that of—Where were you when the stage was held up, pray?"

Before a reply could come, the door swung open to admit another well-dressed shape: the perfect counterpart of that already reflected from yonder polished mirror!

With a sharp, inarticulate cry, Simon Whitehead sprung toward the latest comer, one trembling hand closing upon a sleeve,

its mate pointing toward the gambler, his parched lips shaping the words:

"My money—who took it? You, or your double, yonder!"

Dare Deverell glanced swiftly from man to man, then frowned as he shook off that unsteady grasp, saying, sternly:

"Are you crazy, or merely drunk, old fellow?"

"My money! Give me back my money!" fairly screamed the lawyer, recoiling a bit, but clawing viciously at empty air with skinny paws the while. "I've been robbed of my all! And you took it—you are he! Which one robbed me, I demand?"

As a matter of course this vicious yet whining outburst called general attention that way, and the Dare devil Sport flushed as he both saw and heard enough to show how surely suspicion was turned in his direction.

With face more than usually pale, Tracy Carroll stepped forward, speaking in clear, accents:

"You surely ought to answer these questions, sir! My poor father saw the face of the villain who shot him, and he swears—Look in the glass, both of you, gentlemen! Now—which man was the criminal? For one of you two surely robbed that stage and tried to murder my father!"

Instinctively Dare Deverell obeyed, looking into the mirror, to see more than his own face—to glimpse an enemy in his rear! But, before he could turn to face that peril, a heavy weight descended upon his back and shoulders, while powerful arms encircled his body!

CHAPTER VII.

FIGHTING AGAINST TERRIBLE ODDS.

DARE DEVERELL recognized his peril, but too late to avert it through leaping aside or by wheeling to meet that assailing face to face.

A heavier man than he was fairly upon his back, claspings him around both arms with the evident purpose of preventing the drawing of a weapon, and then came a clear, stern voice:

"You're my man, Dare Deverell! Surrender, for I arrest you—"

That sentence was rudely cut short, for, throwing all powers into the effort, the Dare devil Sport "humped" his shoulders and ducked his head low, catching the fellow wholly off guard, whirling him through the air with heels wildly flourishing as the parabola was formed.

That vigorous grip was broken, and a grunting cry escaped those lips as the would-be arrester went flying in an awkward somersault.

Through the air with wildly flourishing legs and arms, saved only from crashing heavily against yonder counter by striking the startled men, Tracy Carroll and Knox Bassett, upsetting them both, all three coming to the sanded floor in a struggling heap.

Thus, as few other men could have done, Dare Deverell freed himself from arrest, but the supreme effort nearly lost him his balance, and ere the Sport could fairly regain it, Simon Whitehead took action, shrilly screaming as he made a blind rush and tackled that athlete low down.

Clutching those bent knees, Whitehead pulled and wrestled furiously, adding the final straw; for, now wholly off his balance, Dare Deverell plunged heavily forward, likewise coming to the floor.

"In the name of the law!" roared an excited voice from out that confused jumble of bodies and limbs, and as though that was the signal for which all others were waiting, strong men piled upon the Sport, holding him helpless in spite of his desperate struggles to break away, until the detective who had been first to make the assault rallied sufficiently far to take another hand in the game.

Squealing, howling, whining by turns, Simon Whitehead wildly danced around on the edge of that bloodless fight, now swearing at the struggling Sport, but for the most part harping upon his monetary loss.

"Hold him! Kill him! Don't let him—My money! Oh, my money! Make him give back my money! He robbed me—I swear to him—he is the robber who— Oh, my precious money—money!"

Presently something like order came forth from chaos, and that confused mix gradually untangled, showing Dare Deverell a prisoner with handcuffs snapped snugly about his wrists, while he who applied the irons now gripped the Sport tightly by an arm, his other hand clutching revolver-butt as he spoke in stern if panting tones:

"Back—stand back, everybody! I'm a sworn officer of the law, and I've arrested this man for stage-robbery!"

"That's a lie, and you're the liar!" defiantly cried the accused.

"I swear to him!" fairly squealed the little lawyer, prancing wildly about, his bony arms and skinny hands gesticulating like one fairly beside himself with excitement. "He held us up! He took my money and—Give me back my money, you demon, for my poor, wandering boy will—Oh, sirs, make him restore my property, I beg of you all!"

"Stand back, will you?" sternly commanded the detective, who had put those irons in place but a brief space before, shoving the lawyer aside without ceremony. "Don't you dare interfere with the course of the law, sir, or you'll pay full penalty!"

Taking into consideration the heavy odds against him, and the foul manner in which that assault certainly had begun, Dare Deverell hardly need be ashamed of the fight he had made; nor did he look as though he was now, as he swept a quick, comprehensive glance around the saloon, to which still other citizens were flocking, drawn thither by the sounds of that lively if rather brief-lived fight.

"Oh, he don't count!" scornfully said the Dare-devil Sport, lifting a foot to give the whining lawyer a shove rather than a kick. "He's all mouth except his tongue, and that's a clapper to make noise!"

"Don't you try any tricks, Deverell," quickly warned the detective, grip tightening the while. "I'd hate like sin to hurt you, but—"

"Keep your linen on, old man!" cut in the suspect, turning head far enough for a look at his captor. "I wouldn't have made even this bit of a kick if you'd only come at me decent. If you'd come at me white, as any decent man would, why I'd never—"

Dare Deverell broke off abruptly, recoiling and catching his breath sharply like one in pain or—was it merely surprise at such a vision?

The sounds of that struggle reached the chamber in which Pope Carroll had so recently dropped off in a doze, breaking that as yet far from sound slumber, causing the wounded man to start up in bed with a choking cry.

Paying no heed to the agitated pleas of his niece, he sat there, his trembling fingers plucking feverishly at the bedclothes, his breath coming quick and agitated as he listened, to hear—what?

More than his frightened nurse could distinguish, evidently, for an instant later he gave a shrill, quavering cry, at the same time throwing off the coverlet and swinging legs around like one meaning to arise.

"My boy! Her boy! They're murdering him and—Stop, ye devils! I will not—you shall not—stop, I command ye, all!"

"Oh, Uncle Pope!" gasped poor Noreen, trying to restrain the wounded man as he sprung out of bed, but only to be cast aside with feverish force which the maiden was unable to withstand.

And then, only partially clothed, blood showing through the neat bandages applied by the skillful hands of Dr. Hooper, the wounded man fled from his chamber, rushing down stairs and into the saloon, there stopping short as he beheld the prisoner visibly shrinking away in almost certain recognition!

The injured man staggered like one suddenly grown dizzy, for surely this was the darkly handsome visage which met his startled gaze when that sable mask was let fall, back yonder at the scene of the hold up?

Just as swiftly did Mr. Carroll rally, giving a cry of pained indignation as he saw those ironed wrists, pressing forward without heeding aught save those two main figures: Dare Deverell, and the detective who had placed him under arrest as a highwayman.

"For shame!" came huskily through those

nearly bloodless lips. "He never—how dare you arrest my boy for—her boy, too! He never did aught—I swear he was not the robber, gentlemen!"

Instinctively fearing a rescue, Detective Jax stepped more nearly between the invalid and his captive, but even his eyes were drawn toward the open doorway through which another and far fairer vision was just then made manifest: Noreen, following after her uncle!

Tracy Carroll was clearing a way to gain the side of his wounded father, when he, also, was checked by the low cry which the maiden gave as she came upon the dramatic scene, and, with a still wilder manner, Pope Carroll strove to tear away those shameful irons.

"You shall not so degrade—He never did it, I tell you! How could he, when his angel mother—He has her eyes! I knew them—I saw that he wore her eyes when—Oh, Dare! How could you make such a false move, when your mother—A lie, I say! An infernal lie! And I never—he didn't—Oh!"

His voice grew choked and inarticulate, both hands flying up as he staggered like one suddenly smitten with blindness.

"Uncle! dear uncle!" pantingly cried Noreen, forgetting all else as she saw how helpless her relative now was, and springing forward to catch that failing shape, wholly lost to her surroundings for the moment.

That weight took Noreen to her knees, yet she managed to save the wounded man from falling outright, and Tracy Carroll quickly came to her assistance as the old man swooned fairly away through weakness.

"Dead—murdered!" shrilly screamed Simon Whitehead, once more in evidence as he saw a chance to play even with the man whom, right or wrong, he charged with robbing him of his beloved money. "Don't let the bloody villain escape, for he'd ought to pay; it's a hanging matter!"

That word seemed like a lighted match in a powder-magazine, and a half-dozen excited voices caught it up, with dangerous variations.

"Hang him! Lynch him! Run him up a tree!"

An ugly rush kept time to those threatening cries, but Detective Jax bravely stepped into the breach, shaking his loaded revolver in their faces, crying sternly at top of his voice:

"Back, the pile o' ye! Stand back, I say! This is my man, and I'll hold him for a fair trial if I have to shoot a red lane clean through all Paradise Park!"

This unexpectedly bold front checked that mad rush, and before the would-be lynchers could rally again, Tracy Carroll came to the rescue, lifting his voice in a brief but eloquent plea for moderation.

As he thus commanded attention, he added, in clear, firm tones:

"Prove this man guilty of the crime; show, past all doubting, that he held up the stage and shot yonder gray-haired old man; do this, and I will be first to fit the hangman's noose about his neck! But, until you can prove him guilty, past all doubt, I'll fight for him while I live!"

There came a deep and ominous growl at this bold conclusion, and, a moment later, a harsh voice made itself heard:

"An' who in blazes mought you be, to shoot off yer mouth so turrible loud, anyway?"

With a swift stride Tracy Carroll once more reached the side of that silent, blood-stained shape, stooping until a hand could gently touch those gray hairs, then he impressively added:

"This is my poor old father! I am this man's son now; his avenger if death must follow this foul outrage!"

"Yit you dare defend the murderer who—" began Simon Whitehead, only to be silenced by a swift, back-handed blow from the athletic young man, who sternly cried:

"Off with you, fellow! I know how to avenge my father without aid from the likes of you, sir! And—"

"Cut this short, can't you?" sternly asked the prisoner, frowning at the detective whose irons chafed his wrists the while.

"Mr. Carroll needs better care than he's now getting, and—run me in, confound you! Time enough for hanging when I fail to prove my innocence; isn't it?"

All this gave time for cooler thought, and now several more reputable citizens came to the aid of Detective Jax, and the accused was removed from the hotel to jail without further difficulty.

Pope Carroll was carried back to his chamber, where Dr. Hooper made another examination, face as grave as his voice when he finally reported upon the case.

It was a most unfortunate affair all the way through. While his life might not be in actual danger, the patient's mind surely was.

"That must be relieved, and quickly, else his brain will give way!"

After the doctor took his departure, Tracy begged Noreen to go and lie down in her own chamber, but the maiden would not hear of it. She could not even think of sleep while poor Uncle Pope was so badly off; and so, seated together near the bed upon which Mr. Carroll lay in a death-like stupor, the cousins-in-law, in uneasy whispers talked the whole matter over, striving to bring forth a ray of light.

That was by no means easy, taking everything into consideration, and in spite of the bold front which he had maintained in the face of all strangers, Tracy now revealed his gloomy forebodings.

"I couldn't make it seem possible, even after poor daddy let fall—He tried to screen Dare, even while unconsciously betraying his conviction of guilt!"

"I will not—I cannot believe it, even yet!" declared Noreen, fighting against that ugly conviction as only a true and loving woman knows how.

"If I could only think so! But that face—those eyes—"

"Her dear eyes!" huskily moaned the wounded man, stirring restlessly once more. "He never—Oh, how could you, Dare? How could you, boy?"

CHAPTER VIII.

DETECTIVE JAX WANTS A CLUE.

LOOKING trig and spruce as ever in his life, Detective Reuben Jax crossed over to the rude but strongly-built structure which served in Paradise Park as calaboose and jail combined, giving a brisk little nod of recognition as he faced the man on guard before that nail-studded door, then speaking:

"Well, Mr. Winston, how does she flourish, anyway?"

"All right, boss," came the prompt reply. "Bin in thar my sheer o' the night, and now—waal, reekon Bill Davis'll come on juty some time atwixt this and sundown, anyway—durn him!"

"We'll dock his pay and slap it onto your salary, Jack!" suggested Mr. Jax, with one of his most genial smiles. "No bother with the prisoner, then, Winston?"

"Divil a bother! Ef he hain't clean white, boss, then this chicken hes done lost his eye fer color!"

"Well, we'll try to hope he'll come forth with plumage clean and unsoiled as that of an angel fresh from heaven, dear son," drily retorted the detective, stepping nearer the door. "Meanwhile, please let me in. I want to chin-chin a bit with the fine gentleman, don't you know?"

Evidently Mr. Jax was one in authority, for the jailer made no show of reluctance, turning key in lock and removing the fastenings to admit the detective.

As the door closed with a slam, Dare Deverell roused up from the rudely supplied cot upon which he had stretched himself, giving a brief yawn like one whose pleasant dreams had been rudely shattered; but then, as recognition came, he gave a curt nod, saying:

"Come so early to apologize for playing ass, no doubt, pardner?"

"Well, hardly just that, either," smoothly answered the detective, drawing the backless seat nearer that cot, seating himself and gazing keenly into that by no means uncomely face. "You don't look like a man who has just slipped neck out of noose, either, Mr. Deverell!"

"Can't you find a more agreeable subject than that, old man? If not, suppose you take a walk? Or—shall I strain you through the iron grating, up yonder?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," apologized the detective, as the imprisoned athlete seemed about to put his thinly veiled threat into execution. "Don't bother, I beg of you! And, wouldn't you rather have me for friend than enemy, Mr. Deverell?"

"What!" his red lips curling with scorn as eyes flashed up and down that rather portly figure. "You a friend? After jumping all over my back as you did last night?"

"If I had tackled you in front, wouldn't there have been even more of a fight?" shrewdly asked Mr. Jax.

"No; for I'd simply have flattened you out like a tumblebug under a wagon wheel!"

Detective Jax chuckled at this decidedly uncomplimentary assertion, but so far from taking offense he seemed to look upon it as a veiled compliment to his own adroitness.

"All right, Mr. Deverell. I'll not retort, because, whether you believe me or not, I came here this morning with actual friendship for you. May I prove my assertion, sir?"

"If you can; but I seriously doubt that, after what has passed."

"After my arresting you, is it, Mr. Deverell?"

"Yes. I never held up that stage or shot—Why, confound you! I was even then bound hand and foot and muffled until—"

Dare Deverell broke off short, noting how eagerly those little eyes were glowing, how plainly that red face betrayed strong interest in his excited speech.

Detective Jack frowned in his sudden disappointment, but quickly rallied, hitching his stool a little closer the cot as he spoke:

"Now, Mr. Deverell, let it be face to face, man to man! I'm after the road-agent who held up that stage, and if you are not the guilty person then I want to learn just how it came to seem like you; understand?"

"You arrested me on mere suspicion, then, sir?"

"Yes. And, for another reason: there was growing talk about lynching you out of hand, and I felt that if a hanging did take place, it would make the mix so much worse that I'd never learn for sure whether you turned the trick, or were merely a victim of circumstances."

By this time Deverell was beginning to feel a stronger interest in the turn matters seemed to be taking and leaning forward he said:

"You talk just as though you really meant it all!"

"Why wouldn't I mean it, pray?"

"You tell! Just now I can't help thinking about my arrest!"

"If I hadn't taken you in charge, you would have been a corpse, hours ago," earnestly averred the detective. "Sentiment was turning wholly against you, and that whining old fellow, Whitehead, they call him—"

"An infernal sneak and snarling cur!"

"All that, yet none the less dangerous in a case like this. Everybody could see that Mr. Carroll was trying all he knew to shield you, yet every move he made, every word he uttered but served to point your guilt the more clearly!"

"All false, I tell you! I never held up the hearse or shot that—the gentleman," doggedly repeated the Paradise Sport.

"Then help me to fasten the guilt upon the right man!" urged Detective Jax, his little eyes fairly now gleaming with intense interest. "Will you do just that, Dare Deverell?"

A short silence; then the Sport slowly spoke:

"You say everybody looks upon me as the road-agent, sir?"

"Nearly everybody, yes."

"But, why? What sort of proof can be brought against me?"

"I'll tell you, then you can be judge, Mr. Deverell. You were over at Upper-crust, yesterday?"

"Yes. I left there for Paradise, not long after noon."

"So I understand! You passed by the stage, out-footing the mules. You wore your gray hat, your gray sack-coat, your high riding-boots. You were hailed by those aboard the stage when you galloped past and on ahead. You tipped hat to them—"

"Because of the young lady on the box-seat," amended Deverell.

"Well, not so very long after that passing, the stage was held up by a man with a broad-brimmed gray hat, wearing high boots and a gray sack-coat! He wore a cloth mask; but, while robbing the pilgrims, that mask came loose and his face was seen—a face so like yours—"

"But was not mine, I swear to you!" impulsively interposed the prisoner. "At that very moment I was lying helpless, bound hand and foot with my head in a tight bag—for all the world like a pig in a poke!"

He laughed shortly at the expression, but there was precious little mirth in either tone or visage, just then.

"Of course, if you say so, yet the fact remains: 'twas a face so marvelously like yours that all who saw you then, and have seen you since, can only hold one opinion: that you turned the trick, yourself!"

"Who saw that face, first, please?" gravely asked the prisoner.

"Mr. Carroll, the driver and Miss Carroll," came the answer.

Those keen black eyes drooped slightly, and a trifle added color showed upon those cheeks, as Dare Deverell spoke again:

"The young lady I tipped hat to, is it? And she—she declares her belief that I and the road-agent are one and the same?"

Detective Jax frankly owned his error.

"No; I was wrong, there. Miss Carroll persists in saying that you cannot be the guilty one, for— Well, just that; she won't have it so!"

"Good enough! I'd rather hold her fair opinion than that of all the world beside!"

"You know her then, sir?"

"No! But she's a woman, and they know by instinct. But, let that pass, please, and go on with your black marks against my name."

"All right. When his face was revealed, the road-agent seemed to turn wild, for he shot Mr. Carroll, then fled, shooting at random—"

"Hitting no other person?"

"No. He took horse and fled, but chase was made quickly enough for a fair sight to be caught of both horse and rider. His back was turned, of course, but the animal—was the same creature you rode, an hour earlier, Mr. Deverell!"

"I know. That rascal took my horse when he stripped me of the hat and coat and guns! Go on, please!"

"Following the trail left by the road-agent, they found a freshly cast shoe. Andrew Hammer, the blacksmith, swears that he turned the shoe and drove the nails—swears that he put shoe upon your horse, only week before last!"

"Now I ask you, in all candor, Mr. Deverell, when all these links are joined together, hadn't I sufficient evidence to justify an arrest?"

"Yes; but, all the same, you're wrong—dead wrong! I never turned that trick, and so I'll protest if it comes to the gallows!" earnestly asserted the prisoner, eyes and face both fairly aglow.

"Then, who else could have done it all?"

"That's what I want to know! Help me to puzzle it all out, Mr. Jax, and when the guilty devil is fairly trapped, you may name your own reward and I'll see that you get it, even though I have to mortgage my whole future—so there!"

Detective Jax sat without motion, seemingly not seeing the hand which Dare Deverell extended his way.

A curious glow shone in his little eyes. The tip of his curved, eagle-like nose turned paler as though forcibly compressed. And when he spoke again, there was an odd echo to his tones not easy to analyze.

"Never mind just why I should take such an extreme interest in this hold-up, Mr. Deverell; suffice that I do, and that I have vowed a solemn oath to get at the bottom facts of the case."

"You mean—just what?"

"That one of two things is certain: either you robbed the stage and shot Pope Carroll, or else 'twas your very double! Now—show your hand more openly, please! That was your horse. You were seen to enter town last evening, afoot, all in disorder. Will you explain just how you came so, sir?"

CHAPTER IX.

STRIVING TO SOLVE THE PUZZLE.

ALMOST peremptorily came that demand, and Deverell had to flush at tones which he was so little accustomed to hearing.

Still, he saw that Reuben Jax was thoroughly in earnest, and enough had been said to show him that the detective would make a far better friend than enemy.

He could see, too, how cunningly the chain of evidence appeared to be woven about himself, and past experience in wild, half-lawless life such as this warned him that he might count himself extremely lucky did he escape with his life.

"It isn't often I make a confidant of any man, but—"

"If you have nothing to fear from the truth—"

"Go easy, there!" cut in the prisoner, backing the command by a swift motion of that strong right hand. "What I meant was more like this: you're a stranger, save by sight, and the trade you follow is a mighty poor recommendation, in my opinion."

"I've heard red-handed criminals say pretty much the same thing, Mr. Deverell," came the dry retort.

"That's all right, Mr. Jax. You claim to be boring for the naked truth, and this is a fair portion of it. Still, since I know I've been guilty of nothing wrong or even out of the way, I'm ready to tell everything I know which can possibly shed any light over this nasty mix."

"That sounds honest, anyway."

"It's just what it sounds, pardner. Now, what is it you want?"

"A fair explanation of how all this came about: how the fellow who held up the stage, robbed the passengers, shot Mr. Carroll, happened to ride your horse, wear your clothes, carry your guns, and, above all else, have your own face, hair, mustache and voice!"

Dare Deverell had to wince under this swift summary, for he could not help seeing how strongly everything seemed to single him out as the author of that dare-devil exploit.

Still, the consciousness of innocence was with him, and that helped him out in no slight degree.

"You're painting a mighty black picture, pardner, for a fact!"

"Never a bit blacker than circumstances seem to justify, though," was the precise reply. "There's only one way to insure your neck, Deverell, and that is to fetch forward the guilty man!"

"If saying was doing! Never mind, though! If I hop the twig, 'twon't be the first innocent man to climb a tree involuntarily! And now, if you want my side of the picture, right here you have it:

"I was over at Upper-crust on business. Just what, cuts no figure, I reckon, although I can satisfy all doubts on that point, if I have to."

"Never mind for now. If necessary we can look into that subject later on. The manner of your getting into such an ugly mix—that is up for explanation first of all."

"Oh, that came about too easy for any sort of use!" with a brief laugh which betrayed more chagrin than mirth, however. "I just stuck my foot into it, clean up to my neck!"

"After what fashion, pray?"

In response to this curt query Dare Deverell went on to describe the method of his betrayal, speaking of that golden lure and what followed his prompt nibbling at the bait.

"I could kick myself now for being such an ass, but then—well, that was different! I doubt if even you would have been smart enough to foolish the rascal who spread that bait, pardner!"

"Who could it have been, though?"

"Ask me an easy one, please! If I could point that out, the rest wouldn't make much bother!" averred the Dare-devil Sport.

"Still, you must have some idea, Mr. Deverell?"

"I might have a better one if I had been blessed with even a glimpse of the fellow, though!"

"He surely must have been your double, as to size, shape, looks and all, though!" thoughtfully assumed the detective seemingly to the full as thoroughly puzzled as

was the prisoner himself. "And you are hardly one cast in a common mold, either!"

"Well, sir, there's one party within reasonable range who might pass for myself, under favorable circumstances," ventured Deverell.

"And that party is?"

"Knox Bassett!"

Detective Jax shook his head in quick deprecation.

"You'll have to look further than that, Mr. Deverell, I'm sorry to say. Bassett never turned that trick—never!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I've already satisfied myself on that point, for the resemblance struck me last night, when I arrested you. And so—well, of course I didn't publish my suspicions to all Paradise, but I made sure of that main point: Knox Bassett couldn't have taken your place for he can show a perfect *alibi*."

"Is that so?"

"That is so! Bassett was right here in town, all day and evening. He was up to his neck in a game of draw at the very hour that hold-up took place; so you see—"

"Who said he was? What witnesses has he, first?"

"Three of them. I have their names here," and the detective produced a vest-pocket memorandum, opening it at a turn-down leaf.

Dare Deverell leaned forward, taking the miniature book, glancing over those penciled names, then giving a short laugh before saying:

"His closets cronies, not to say pals! Why, man, dear, either one of that trio would swear black was snowy white if Knox Bassett merely winked that way!"

"Then you really think he played your double?"

"I'm not saying just that, either," half protested the Dare-devil Sport, passing the memorandum-book back to its owner. "I know that I didn't turn the trick. I know that it was turned, and that by some cunning devil who evidently planned to cast the whole blame upon my shoulders!"

"Bassett is the only man I can place right now who looks enough like me to be so mistaken, but if he was playing poker in town at that exact hour—"

"As three men besides himself stand ready to make oath, remember."

"Then 'twas some other fellow made up to resemble me! In that case, who could it have been? And why take so much trouble so much risk?"

Deverell certainly was not able to answer his own queries, and Detective Jax made no attempt to do so.

For more than a minute the two men sat in silence, each one pondering over that puzzling mystery after his own fashion.

Reuben Jax was first to break that silence, and his tones were as grave as his face when he said:

"Although I deemed it my duty to place you under arrest, last night, Mr. Deverell, I could hardly convince myself that you were actually guilty of this lawless deed, and—"

"Thanks, awfully!"

"This is no time for straw-splitting, bear in mind," with a touch of irritation in his tones. "You scarcely appreciate your real peril, I fear, Mr. Deverell!"

"In still plainer words, please?"

"Just this: The whole town is growing hot over the affair, and more than one suggestion of lynch law has been made—"

"Oh, that cuts no ice!" with undisguised scorn in both voice and face. "Curs must howl, don't you know?"

"Not all curs in this case, though! Some of the most reputable citizens in Paradise have spoken in tones which can't well be mistaken; and if Mr. Carroll should die of his—"

"He's not in such great peril, surely?" interrupted the prisoner, tone and expression changing as if by magic.

"From all accounts he surely is," gravely assured the man-hunter, keenly scanning that face the while.

"But I thought— He looked strong enough when— And yet, that fainting-fit!"

"From all I can learn, Mr. Carroll is really in a bad way," added the detective.

"His wound was a severe one; he suffered great loss of blood before he could be given proper medical attention; but he appears to be worst of all hurt by thoughts of your possible guilt!"

Detective Jax broke off at this like one expecting word or sign, but Dare Deverell gave neither one nor the other.

Bending over to rest elbows on knees, while joined palms clasped and supported his chin, the Dare-Devil Sport was gazing fixedly at the none too clean floor of the jail.

His face seemed paler than ordinary, but that alone betrayed him; outwardly he was cool and steady-nerved as ever.

"To boil it all down, then, Pope Carroll's life is in danger, and if he should die—well, you'd be lynched to a dead certainty!" almost savagely avowed the detective. "Unless—"

"Go on," quietly requested the prisoner as Reuben Jax paused.

"Unless I could foolish them, of course."

"And how, pray?"

"Well, I've never had a prisoner taken from me yet, and I'm too old to make such a beginning now! I'll run you off in time, and I reckon we can win clear with whole hides, if—"

"That will do, pardner!"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this: if you sneak me off after that fashion, you'll have to bind and gag me first, then tote me off on your own legs, for I'll never make a sneak of it—never! I am not built that way, you see!"

"Don't be foolish, man!"

"Rather fool than cur, though!"

"But, man, don't you understand?" impatiently cried the detective, now thoroughly worked up by this unlooked-for obstinacy on the part of his prisoner. "If that should happen—if Pope Carroll should die of his injuries—"

"May heaven forefend!"

"That's all right; but I tell you there really is danger of such an ending! And if it should be, the whole town would rise up in arms, ready for lynching!"

"Tough luck, surely!"

"Then why invite it? Why not let me— But of course you will! You're not a fool, Deverell, and if I can slip you away out of all this nasty mix—"

"Get ready to tote me, I repeat."

"Oh, come off! Better run than hang, isn't it?"

"No! Give me my tools and I'll fight the whole town, but I'll never turn tail and so help burn my brand still deeper—never!"

Detective Jax could not help seeing how thoroughly in earnest the imprisoned Sport was, and he gave over for the time being, rising to his feet and moving toward the door as he spoke:

"Well, we'll try to hope for better things, anyway. If I can hit on any clue which seems worth following up, I'll drop in on you again. Until then—take matters as easy as you can, old fellow!"

"I generally do," retorted Deverell, ignoring that proffered hand and sinking back upon his cot.

For some time after Detective Jax had taken his departure, nothing happened to disturb the prisoner, and he lay there puzzling intently over the queer case, trying in vain to make everything come out clearly.

Almost without being conscious of the fact, Dare Deverell heard a low, indistinct muttering sound grow louder and plainer, but his first intimation of the startling truth came when his jailer flung open the heavy door, excitedly crying out:

"Little ole Cain to pay, boss! Old gent's done croaked, an' the boys is gittin' a rope ready fer your neck—an' that's no lie, either!"

CHAPTER X.

A HOWL FOR THE HANGMAN.

As he took a walk through town after leaving the jail, Detective Jax found his worst fears only too well founded, so far as the prospective fate of his prisoner was concerned.

The sentiment in favor of a resort to lynch law seemed steadily growing, aided no little by the malignant efforts of Simon

Whitehead, who appeared fairly beside himself over the loss of his precious money.

The disreputable-looking limb of the law was hurrying to and fro, doing all he knew how to fan that fever to a dangerous pitch, viciously denouncing his despoiler in one breath, then bewailing the loss of the funds on which he had so fondly counted to bring himself and his poor, wandering son together once more.

Gifted with a glib speech, able to command tears—or their semblance—at will, Simon Whitehead was an enemy by no means to be despised; but as he passed along, looking deeper into that growing restlessness, Reuben Jax was not long in discovering a still greater source of danger.

Knox Bassett was likewise at work adding fuel to the fire, although he proceeded after a more guarded fashion, letting drop a word here, a look or a shrug yonder, but making every word, sign, look or shrug count for the utmost as only a cool, shrewd, keen-witted man knows how.

The gambler said but little which could be brought up to witness against himself in case of an afterclap, but nevertheless he was doing his level best to bring about an outbreak which would almost certainly end in the hanging of the man who now stood charged with highway robbery and malicious assault with intent to kill.

After all, what could be more natural on his part?

Suspicion had actually turned his way, almost from the first, thanks to the strong resemblance he bore to the Dare-devil Sport.

He knew Detective Jax had been making close and prying investigations in his quarter, and no doubt he felt that his only assurance of safety lay in punishing another for committing that double outrage.

"Not that I wish any harm to Deverell; I've always considered him clean white and a perfect gentleman until— Well, somebody who must look mightily like us turned the trick, and I can prove past all doubting that I couldn't have done it, even if my talents ran that way! And so—you understand?"

After this adroit fashion the Paradise gambler went the rounds, now damning his facial double with faint praise, then giving nod or sign to one of his cronies who certainly used louder if not more dangerous methods, all of which tended toward the lawless gallows.

Steadily the fever increased with what it fed upon, the crowd gathering toward a common center, while threats grew louder and less open to misconception.

More than one of the rougher units called aloud for hanging, while the voices raised against any rash action grew fainter and fewer in number as their owners either retreated in disgust or dread, or else were won over to the other side.

Then, feeling that the time was ripe for positive action, Simon Whitehead scrambled upon a perch from whence he could see as well as be seen by all within range of his voice, swinging his battered felt hat to further attract attention, then crying aloud:

"Gentlemen! Men of Paradise Park! Friends, brothers all!"

"Whooray fer the little runty scrub, anyway!"

"Spit 'er out, critter!"

"Shet up an' listen, blame yer! Speech! Give us a dose, pardner!"

Simon Whitehead flung up both hands to command silence, and despite his miserable appearance, grace was presently accorded him.

No need to give his fiery speech in full, for it was but a repetition of what he had been saying ever since the hold-up; bewailing the loss of his money, then trying for the sympathies of the mob by showing how upon that hard-earned store he depended to regain the child a sad series of misfortunes had left him.

"A poor, lonely orphan lad, gentlemen, wandering through ways of darkness and danger! My sole hope of happiness here on earth—my one chance of regaining—oh, men if ye be men! Fathers if such ye are! Fellowmen as I know you! Do not let this monster go unpunished while there is a limb to hold, a rope to hang, a hand to fit the noose!"

Growing wilder and fiercer as he pro-

ceeded, never stopping to perfect his logic but depending wholly on stirring up the evil passions which seem native to each mortal's make, the vicious little lawyer was only checked in his savage tirade when an athletic figure pushed through those close-crowded ranks and unceremoniously shoved him off his perch, stepping upon it himself an instant later.

Simon Whitehead gave a yell of mingled anger and affright, while ugly sounds arose from the mob itself; but without the slightest show of fear the new-comer faced those angry men, lifting an empty hand by way of truce, then speaking loudly, clearly:

"Hear me, first, gentlemen!"

"An' who the deuce might you be, critter?"

"If you mean my name, that is Tracy Carroll. If you wish to know why I feel such a deep interest in this matter, I am the son of the man who was shot—"

"Don't hear him!" fairly shrieked the malignant little lawyer from where that strong arm had swung him. "He wants to screen the murderer of his own father!"

"That's a lie, and no one knows it better than he whose foul lips just gave the words utterance!" sternly cried the young man, face flushed and dark-blue eyes glowing vividly.

"Then why try to talk in favor of Dare-devil?" demanded another voice from out that uneasily surging crowd.

"Because I'm not so certain that Dare Deverell fired that shot!" came the instant response. "If I was positive as to that, gentlemen, I'd be the first man of all to fit the hangman's noose about his neck! But now—first prove him guilty, then do your lynching!"

First one and then another unit from the many hurled questions and jeers at the bold speaker, but Tracy Carroll never flinched, giving back answer for query, quip for scoff, showing a fair front through it all, yet nearly breaking down when, in answer to a question, he admitted that his poor father was far worse—that he seemingly lay at the point of death, even then!

Swift to take advantage of any opening, real or apparent, and viciously bent on carrying his main point, Simon Whitehead shrilly squealed:

"Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth! Carroll's dead, and his devilish assassin is— To the jail, all honest men! Hang him! Lynch the infernal murderer!"

With a startled exclamation Tracy Carroll leaped down from his elevated position and rushed away in the direction of the hotel where he had left his wounded parent, while the mob wildly caught up that howl for human blood, surging blindly away toward the jail where Dare Deverell was held prisoner.

Meanwhile Detective Jax had not been idle, but gathering together a few of the cool-headed and more reputable citizens, he prepared to defend both jail and prisoner to the bitter end.

And so it came to pass that, in place of carrying the jail by storm while their fever was hottest, the mob recoiled from that bold front, where half a score loaded revolvers stared them full in the face, and from back of which came that stern warning:

"Steady, gentlemen! We represent the law, and you can't come in! If you try it on, we'll shoot—and shoot to kill!"

When a mob falters, it is lost, so far as carrying out its bloody intentions go; and just so it was now.

Detective Jax first threatened, then reasoned with the crowd, holding them at bay until word was brought from the hotel where the wounded man had been taken; word that contradicted the lying report made by the anarchistic lawyer, Simon Whitehead.

"There has been no murder, gentlemen, for Mr. Carroll still lives!" cried Detective Jax, his tones reaching far beyond the limits of that assembly. "And he declares his firm belief in Dare Deverell's innocence!"

That proved to be the climax, and gradually the mob dispersed, yet not without sundry growlings which showed a still dangerous sentiment opposed to the Dare devil Sport.

Earliest among those who skulked off went Simon Whitehead, losing what little nerve

he could boast at the first symptom of the turning tide.

But he was not to go scot-free in the end, for some little time after that tumult had been quelled, Detective Jax chanced to come face to face with the weazen rascal, and giving him no chance to dodge, laid heavy hand on collar as he sternly spoke:

"Look ye, Mr. Whitehead, if you try to stir up further trouble, you will have to pay full penalty. What have you against Deverell, anyway?"

"He robbed me! He stole all I had to keep me from starvation and—my poor, wandering boy! How can I—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" ruthlessly interrupted the detective, giving Simon a rough shake the while.

"No, no! He robbed me of all that makes life dear! Restore that, and I'll be quiet. If not—then I'll have sweet revenge—revenge!"

Detective Jax tightened that grip as the lawyer strove to break away, and bending forward a bit in order to see more clearly, he gazed keenly into that yellow, wrinkled visage for a brief space of silence.

Then he spoke meaningly:

"Look ye, Mr. Simon Whitehead! You're playing some sort of game which may end in more hangings than one unless you're mighty careful!"

"I don't—what do you mean, sir?" gasped Whitehead, shrinking as far away as that firm grip would permit. "I don't—how dare you, sir?"

"I begin to fancy there is a heap sight more in this little affair than shows on the surface, as yet! Why are you so eager to bring about the death of Dare Deverell, Mr. Whitehead?"

"I don't—I don't understand!"

"Neither do I, as yet, but I will in the end, you can depend on that, Mr. Whitehead; so—on guard, now!" cried Reuben Jax, releasing his hold; and then the little rascal slunk away as quickly as he knew how.

CHAPTER XI.

BETRAYING HIS TRUST.

As the day grew older Paradise Park cooled down, and when the sun had fairly crossed the meridian all danger of a lynching-bee seemed of the past.

There was an ugly undercurrent, however, which caused Detective Jax no little uneasiness for the future; but even he believed that no open action would be taken unless Pope Carroll should die.

In that case he almost certainly would have another fight on his hands if he hoped to hold his prisoner for the slower process of law and justice.

Once again he broached the matter of removal on the sly, but as before, Dare Deverell flatly declined to even discuss the matter.

"Give me my guns, turn me loose, bid me make my own way from this to any point you may fancy better, pardner, and I'll get there by my lonesome or lose a leg trying," was the most the Dare-devil Sport would grant. "But make a sneak, just as though I'd been sucking eggs and feared a licking for it? Well, not any!"

On the other hand, both Knox Bassett and Simon Whitehead kept quiet if not in actual retirement, making no open attempt to further the law of Judge Lynch.

And so it came to pass that all save the regular guard was withdrawn from the jail by the time the hour for supper rolled around, and even the most bloodthirsty advocates of a long rope and a short shrift had scant hopes of seeing any more of their peculiar sort of "fun."

It was again John Winston's tour of duty at the jail, but with him now was his alternate, Bill Davis; and as they squatted there on "the easy side" of that stout, nail-studded door, their heads were so close together that the twin curls of whitish vapor from their stumpy pipes joined in one none too sweetly-scented cloud.

"What is they into it fer me, though; that's the sort o' flea that's bitin' me, jest now!" significantly declared Winston, with a vigorous nod of his frowzy pow.

"What is they in jest holdin' yer quiet on tel the gang gits tha'r back up ag'in, an'

sends the Sport climbin' a tree?" bluntly demanded the substitute jailer.

"Waal, thar hain't no shootin', anyway!"

"Who's gwine to do ary shootin'?"

"Ef the gang comes, an' I can't give no fa'r excuse when they ax whar is the critter—eh?"

"That's all right, too! It'll be fixed up so mighty slick that you'll git the good pity o' the hull town, 'stead o' ary blame," confidently asserted Davis, growing the more deeply in earnest as objections were presented.

"That's what you say!"

"An' that's jest what'll be sure proved to ye, Jack, ef so be you'll play sensible an' take the pile that's bein' offered ye. An' fer what? Nothin' wuss then to help a clean white Sport cheat the rope; nothin' wuss then jest that!"

"That hain't the p'int, though, Billy," earnestly assured Winston, letting pipe fall in his intense interest. "I'd go pritty nigh as fur's the next critter fer to s'arve the Sport, but—Waal, money talks! An' whar the resk is big, so ought the pay to be. See?"

"An' that's all right, too, Jack. Thar'll be pay a-plenty, ef you'll agree to do your share. An' so—is it a whack, then?"

But Winston was hardly prepared to close a bargain so hastily, and still hung in the wind.

"Wait a wee, pardner," he said, after a few moments spent in thought. "Who is it gettin' up this yer' scheme, anyway?"

"What's that got to do with it?" impatiently demanded Davis.

"Heap much, I reckon! Who's gwine fer to put up the dingbats?"

It was William's turn to hesitate now, but he wasted very few moments before reaching a decision.

"Waal, 'pears to me thar's mighty little sense in callin' out names when money's ready fer to do the talkin', pardner; but—who done the most to hinder the lynchers, to-day?"

"Pussy Jax!" was the rather irreverent answer.

"Augh! not him! Back yender whar the talkin' was gwine on, I mean. An' when—Ketch on, do ye?"

For Jack Winston gave a low whistle, his shaggy brows going up in a beautiful arch the while.

"The old gent's son, hey?"

"Gal, too, ef ye must know the hull durned 'rangement, Jacky! They don't nyther one of 'em b'lieve the Sport done the dirty work, an' so—well, they're wantin' to git him safe out o' Paradise afore 'nother gang gits a big mad on, don't ye understand?"

"Who done the talkin' fer 'em all?" asked Winston, giving free vent to his natural curiosity.

"What's that got to do with it?" impatiently grunted Davis. "Looks like you couldn't git enough fer—Money's money, hain't it, blame ye?"

"Sure! But, all the same—"

"An' what ye don't know ye can't tell, isn't it? An' so, blame ye, boy, never mind pryin' too deep into what isn't best fer to git all mixed up into!"

"How'm I to know they hain't some sort o' gum game into it, though? You'll be well out of it, Billy, but me—that's the p'int, boy!"

"An' that's jest why we're fixin' matters so ye kin stick to the naked truth an' yit do no harm with all yer chin-chin," doggedly persisted Davis. "Ef ye don't know who was doin' of the job, ye can't tell it, no matter how hard they ax ye, kin ye, pard?"

"No, but—"

"An' no she stays! Ef you won't go it blind that fur, then the hull blame deal is off, an' we don't git no ducats; see?"

Jack Winston was sorely taken aback by this blunt method of settling matters, but he knew his comrade sufficiently well to feel that this was an obstacle not to be overridden, and yielded accordingly.

"Well, hev it your own way, so fur, pardner; but—how's the thing to be done, fu'st?"

"Fu'st, will you play your keards jest es we tell ye?"

"On the dead levee? 'Tain't all a dirty trick fer to run the Sport up a tree, Billy?"

"Run nothin'! No! It's to keep him

from jest that, blame ye! An' so—yes or no?"

"Yes."

"All right! It'll putt a yaller lining into your pockets, Jack; an' sech a linin' as you hain't felt fer many a long day!"

"Good! Only—ef he won't play, Billy?"

"Ef who won't play?"

Winston gave a little nod of his head toward the other side of that iron-studded door, thus making his meaning sufficiently clear without the addition of words. Still, he added:

"The Sport, o' course. Pussy Jax wanted him to rack out on the sly, fer I hearn 'em talkin' it jest that way; but no, sir! He swore he'd fight the hull blame' town, but run—divil a bit!"

Davis gave a brief chuckle at this before whispering:

"That's whar the fun comes in, pardner! He'll be tuck, whether or no! An' so—jest a weenty bit nigher, Jacky! It'd spile the hull thing ef the Sport was to ketch even a hint o' the trick what's comin' onto him like a dump o' brickbats from a house-top!"

The two heads came closer together, and while one talked, the other listened with intent eagerness.

"It's fixed like this, pardner: the Sport will be tuck good keer of by them as is willin' fer to putt up the rocks onto it. You'll be tied up, slick, an' I'll come in the mornin' at the usual time, an' set you free when the alarm is sent out—see?"

"Not so blame' cl'ar es I'd like, though! How'll I show clean paws?"

"That's dead easy, man! Cain't you sw'ar the Sport watched his good chaince an' so foolishd ye? Jumped on your back, knocked ye plum' silly, tied ye tight an' then racked out fer mo' healthy quarters? Eh?"

Winston rubbed his bristly chin dubiously, but his face lightened perceptibly when Davis slipped a few yellow coins into his free palm, saying softly:

"That's jest a marker, mate! Lord! We'll be fit fer to cut sech a ge-lorious splurge as—Go 'way, honey!"

Winston joined in that hearty if cautiously subdued chuckle; but even now his curiosity came to the surface.

"That settles it, pardner! Yit—who's doin' of it all, anyway?"

"You'll know that plenty soon, Jacky," declared Davis, rising and stowing away his pipe. "Git a ready on, an' see that you play the game so the Sport won't ketch on afore it's past kickin' time, now!"

After a little more talk, the two jailers separated, Davis going off to other work, while Winston opened door and stepped inside the jail, where Dare Deverell was busily thinking over the puzzling as well as dangerous predicament into which he had so unluckily stumbled.

After a time a low summons came at the door, and mumbling something about his mate agreeing to put in an hour or so killing time in company, Winston opened the barrier to admit Bill Davis.

The imprisoned Sport showed some natural curiosity in this addition to the list, but as the two chums talked in drowsy whispers, seemingly far more interested in their pipes than aught else, his attention wavered, then gave way entirely, and he again fell to puzzling over that queer mix-up.

Guardedly the schemers eyed the Sport from time to time; one ready to take action as soon as the other should give the agreed-upon signal, his mate sticking closely to the plan as marked out by far keener minds than either of these.

Then, unheard by the brooding Sport, the faint signal came from without, and with a meaning look toward the jailer, Billy Davis rose to his feet without sound enough to alarm Dare Deverell, whose back was just then turned that way.

Then, with a pantherish leap, Davis assailed the Sport, claspng both arms tightly to his sides, tripping him up across the cot.

sprung inside, both assailing the surprised Sport who had so adroitly been overthrown by the treacherous guard.

With great adroitness a sack was drawn over Deverell's head, thus preventing him from gaining even a passing glimpse of his assailants, and that muffler was employed so well that hardly a sound could escape his lips; certainly not sufficient to alarm any person outside of those four walls.

Even then Dare-devil Sport fought stubbornly, yielding only to odds and giving over only when his arms were forced far back to be tied at the bend of his elbows.

Meanwhile Jack Winston had closed the door, standing ready to lend a hand in case of need; but no such assistance was required of him, and he drew a long breath of relief when he saw Dare Deverell tumbled over on his back, lengthwise the cot, bound and blinded past sight, sound or fighting further.

One of the masked men lifted a warning hand which checked the words Winston was on the point of uttering, and then a few moments were spent in catching breath after that brisk struggle.

Winston felt as powerful curiosity now as ever, but he used his eyes in vain. The two men were carefully masked, and their coats were turned wrong side outward, while all went to show what unusual precautions they had taken to guard against recognition by either friend or foe.

After a minute or two spent thus, the taller of the two men went to the door, opening it a few inches, bending ear to the crack and listening intently.

Nothing came to give alarm, or to indicate that the town was even suspecting fresh trouble in that quarter; and then, returning, the mask nodded briskly to his comrade.

One at head, the other at feet, the masks picked up their prisoner and carried him bodily out of the jail, leaving Winston and Davis behind to watch and to wait; but not for many moments.

Having placed the hampered Sport in safety for the time being, the disguised schemers returned to the jail, showing anxiety to complete that portion of their night's work.

The taller mask bore with him the coat taken from the Sport during the first of that fierce struggle, and with the aid of a pocket-knife, he cut this into strips while speaking in odd-sounding tones:

"All's well, so far, pardner; and now—just a hint or two for your future guidance!"

"You already know the part you're expected to play; to swear that Deverell watched his chance and overpowering you, trussed you up past the possibility of getting outside to raise the alarm?"

"Sure! An' yit, boss—"

"I'm doing the chin-music, thank you!" curtly interrupted the mask, putting up his knife and motioning, as he added: "Lie down, please! I'll give you the little rest when I've trussed you up to the queen's taste. Down, or—That's more like it!"

Cowed, the jailer obeyed, and those nimble hands quickly applied bonds which might have puzzled an unwilling captive to either slip or to break, speaking the while.

"Of course the Sport slugged you, and then choked you! That put you safely to sleep, so that you never roused up until your pardner came to relieve you in the morning. Understand?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, then! There!" with a low chuckle of approval as he drew the last knot tightly, stepping back a bit the better to inspect his own handiwork.

That inspection appeared to be entirely satisfactory, for he laughed again, then bent over to raise that heavy form in his arms and bearing it to the cot, there to be placed in a more comfortable position.

"No use to make you suffer more than the law allows!" by way of explanation. "And the Sport always was noted for his kindness and consideration, eh, pardner?"

"Then he knows what—"

"If not now, be sure he will know when all's ripe for the telling," once more interrupted the masked schemer, who evidently liked the sound of his own voice far better than that of any other, just then. "And now—you know the part you are expected to play—can you stick to the line marked out, Winston?"

"I've done got to, looks like!" rather rue-

fully, as though he was beginning to doubt and to regret, both.

"That's all right, then, and when it's safe to do so, Davis will make a fair divvy with you. Not now; if found with too big a wad in your kicks, some fool might accuse you of being bought out by the enemy!"

Another low, amused chuckle, then the mask produced a leather-covered flask, unscrewing the top and holding the bottle temptingly near that ruddy-tipped nose while adding:

"Have a weenty sup, pardner? If only to drink good luck to our pretty little game!"

Winston's mouth opened as though those words touched a hidden spring, and the masked man held the flask in position until the jailer moved his head in silent token that he had a polite sufficiency.

"Pleasant dreams be thine, brother!" lightly said the mask, then putting out the light and leaving the jail, closing the door behind himself.

All was quiet in that vicinity, and assuring himself of this, the chief plotter moved across to where his mates were standing guard over the bound and blinded Sport, making a motion which was readily understood without words.

The three men picked Dare Deverell up, hurrying off through the night with him, paying no heed to his struggles to free himself, save to mutter oath or curse when those writhings and twistings called for a brief halt in order to gain a better hold upon that awkward burden.

Fortunately for them the jail was located pretty near one edge of Paradise Park, and it only took a few minutes for them to reach a point where a meek yet willing burro was hitched in waiting.

Dare Deverell was fastened upon the donkey's back after a fashion, then the little squad moved on through the night, less caution being called for now that they had won fairly clear of the town without being seen or having attention called their way.

Deverell caused some little trouble, even now, but when he realized that all he might do but added to his own discomfort if not actual peril, without troubling his guardians in the least, he gave over, biding his time in hopes of meeting with a more favorable opportunity.

The taller mask appeared to be the one in authority, and he led the burro, while Davis and the lesser mask held the prisoner in place as they journeyed further from town and deeper into the hills by which Paradise Park was surrounded.

Presently a halt was called, and first hitching the donkey to a convenient shrub, the taller mask spoke in oddly croaking tones, the bare sound of which caused the blood to leap hot and swiftly through the veins of the captive Sport; for, almost past doubt, it was the voice of his double who had held up the stage and shot down Pope Carroll!

"I'll look to the gent for a little, mates. Suppose you take a bit of a walk? Not too far, but just far enough?"

The second mask slipped a hand through the arm of the false jailer and led him away, puzzled, no doubt, yet wise enough to hold a still tongue in his head the while.

Watching until the couple faded away in the gloom, the taller mask lifted Dare Deverell from the saddle, dumping him to earth rather unceremoniously, yet giving him a low rock as a support for his back while sitting.

Standing close before the bound man, the stranger viewed him for a half-minute, then laughed oddly as one hand rose toward the black mask which covered both head and face from inspection.

"Shall I introduce myself, Dare Deverell? Are you curious to learn who it is who takes so much trouble to cheat the lynchers out of their just dues? Then—behold!"

With a swift movement that covering was torn away, and leaning forward to grant a better view, the Unknown remained thus for a score of seconds—long enough even in that dim and deceptive light for Dare Deverell to note a marvelous semblance of himself—a perfect double!

Then, with a deft motion, the Unknown replaced that heavy muffler in part, leaving it so that a mere touch would prove suf-

CHAPTER XII.

THE SPORT AND HIS DOUBLE.

At that same instant the prison door was flung quickly open and two masked men

ficient to cover that face again, yet granting the Sport the use of his eyesight, as yet.

Drawing back, he donned his cloth mask once more, after which he squatted down directly in front of his prisoner, speaking in those queer, croaking tones:

"Well, how much wiser are you, worthy brother-in-loops? Even now can you call me by name?"

"Knox Bassett or—the devil!" exploded the Dare-devil Sport.

"Bah!" with a mocking laugh to follow. "If not quite blind as a bat, pardner, you're lunny as a bedlamite! I'm anybody rather than— But what matter? If that belief comforts you, stick to it! Even if your wild guess came miles nearer the right target, devil a harm could it harm me! For—listen, please!

"For what you see now, what you may hear next, will never make any other mortal wiser! Why? Because this night sees you pass out of the game I am playing, once and forever!"

The Dare-devil's Double paused as though anticipating an outburst of some description, but none such came.

Dare Deverell felt that his very life was in great peril, but he likewise knew that naught he might do could better his case; those bonds were beyond his power to break or to slip, and he could only take what might come.

That knowledge only served to render him cooler, steadier, stronger of nerve; for he would cheat his cunning double this far: he should not hear him beg, should not see him flinch, let what might befall!

As though he read something of this truth, the Double spoke on in swift, croaking tones, showing how surely he had blackened the fair fame of the Sport, laughing afresh as he told how surely he had wound the toils about his second-self.

"If you ask why, I'll tell you—nothing! Only this: that you once crossed my path when all went your way and against me! I took a most solemn oath then to never know full rest until I had avenged my wrongs, and this—is merely a beginning!"

"I don't wish to kill you—in body! I aim at worse than that. I mean to make you a fugitive from all law! To make you the scorn and contempt of all honest men and reputable women!"

"If you dare return to Paradise Park, 'twill only be to meet death by the gallows, for—open your ears, my most noble Shadow!"

Pausing a bit as though to give added importance to his revelation through suspense, the Unknown spoke further:

"Everything has been so arranged as to make all Paradise believe you fled of your own accord, after tricking and binding your jailer! All you might say or vow would not alter that belief in the slightest, for—now mark me, Dare Deverell!"

"I am saying this simply because I'd prefer you to live on, a branded and thrice-acursed fugitive! So—when you win clear of this, flee fast and flee far, for your life will surely pay the penalty if you are ever caught by the citizens of yonder town!"

"Do you ask me why? Because—mark me, I repeat! Because the man to act as your jailer will be found bound and—dead!"

"You devil!" hoarsely panted the Sport, trying to burst his bonds and get at the throat of his satanic double.

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS.

THE Dare-devil Sport's double made no effort to check that flight for freedom, standing coolly by, laughing like one who thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle.

His faith in those bonds was fully justified, for in spite of his really remarkable strength of arm and capacity of body, Deverell failed utterly in his attempt to break away, finally giving over through pure physical exhaustion.

"Treat a fool according to his folly, the wise men advise us," quoth the Sport's Double. "You've had your little exercise, Mr. Deverell, now prick your ears a weenty bit and listen to my parting words.

"I've so far told you the naked truth, although you may find it difficult to believe

in toto. Just so surely as you show face in or around Paradise Park after the sun rises to-morrow morning, just so certainly will you be run up a tree so mighty sudden 'twill make your head swim like an inflated bladder!"

"You devil!" panted the helpless man.

"Devil goes, but a live devil beats a dead dog all hollow! So—take my advice, pardner, and rack out o' this the quickest you know how, when you've shaken these hopples fairly off! If not; if you are fool enough to take your chances back yonder—good-by!"

While saying this, the Dare-devil Sport's Double was busy with his hands as well, stooping over the hampered adventurer and fumbling with those bonds which held Deverell's arms helpless.

Then he struck a match and appeared to light something he had attached to the pliable rope so artistically knotted about those elbows, drawing back a bit to add:

"Let your nose confirm my words, Mr. Deverell! I've lit a fuse fastened to your bonds, carefully calculated as to length. Lie quiet, and in due course that fuse will burn itself out, and so far weaken your bonds that you can snap the remainder without any great effort.

"Then you can do this: flee and live, stay and—climb a tree! If you foolishly fight ahead of time, you may extinguish the fuse, when—well, if the lynchers fail to find you, the mountain wolves will!"

"Now, my delighted darling! I'll leave you to your own sweet reflections and—your fate! Make the best of it, I adjure you!"

"Better do your nasty work up brown, for if not—I'll kill you at our next meeting!"

"Bah! Save your breath to cool your own porridge, Deverell! As for your revenge, the friends of your murdered jailer will look after that!"

Without waiting for retort or reply, the Dare-devil Sport's Double turned away, taking with him the patient burro, as though he had further use for that beast of burden.

With the gloom that enveloped all things, it did not take long or call for very many steps to put him out of sight of the hampered Sport, and pausing then the Unknown sounded a low, quavering whistle.

This quickly brought an answer in person, and the lesser mask made his coming still more obvious by asking:

"Which way now, boss?"

"After me is good manners!" gruffly croaked the master, moving off through the night once more.

He was closely followed by the other men, Davis fairly alive with curiosity, for this was crossing the limits of the knowledge given him in advance of the programme for that night's work.

Still, he hardly dared ask for further light just then, and tried to content himself with guessing at the outcome.

One thing was certain: instead of plunging deeper into the hills, they were now moving in the direction of town, yet so shaping course as to strike camp at a point almost directly opposite from that where stood the jail.

No words were spoken until the trio could catch a pretty fair view of yonder quiet and evidently slumbering town, then the leader halted, turning toward his followers to abruptly ask:

"Are you ready for the next bit of work, boys?"

The lesser mask gave a prompt yes, but Bill Davis caught at the chance to ask:

"What sort o' job is it, first, boss?"

A low, curious chuckle found birth back of that mask, then the leader put a question in turn:

"Are you dead in love with Andy Hammer, the blacksmith, pardner?"

"I don't—"

"Play you do, then! Is he any very particular friend of yours?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, what I expect you to do right now is to prove Andy a born liar. Will you play your part in administering the little dose?"

"Yes, but—"

"That'll do! You'll understand all the whys and wherefores ere long, my good friend; for now—jog along!"

"That's all right, boss, but when I 'gred fer to—"

"What's eating you now, Davis? Didn't you say you were ready?"

"Waal, yes, boss; but—ef thar's to be any killin' or sech—"

"You'll be the butcher, not we," curtly cut in the Sport's Double, with an impatient fling of one gloved hand. "Our mission this night is to preserve life, not to take it, bear in mind."

"Oh, ef she runs like that!"

"She just does, pardner," with another odd, croaking chuckle which fairly gave the jailer the shivers as he listened. "Now, button up and come on, lively!"

Only pausing once more to leave the burro where it could readily be retrieved when its services should again be required, the Sport's Double led the way directly to the little shanty on the edge of town in which the bachelor blacksmith dwelt when at home.

Giving a warning gesture to his fellows, he muttered in guarded tones:

"Let me do the talking for the crowd, remember! And—if you have to address me, just bear in mind that I'm Smith—John Smith!"

With this final caution, the Double tapped sharply at the closed door, and an instant later won a response.

"Who's thar?"

"Me—you know!"

"Hellow! That you, Joe?" hastily spluttered Hammer, and those without could hear the blacksmith fairly tumbling off his rude bunk.

"Yes, it's me! And—roust out, Andy! The gang's trying to play lynchers ag'in, and we want all honest men to guard Deverell!"

"The blazes you say!"

Hammer flung open his door, affording a glimpse of a half-dressed figure; but without stopping for ceremony, "John Smith" leaped upon his dupe, bearing him backward by the very surprise of that assault, sternly croaking forth:

"Dump him, lads! Quiet, not kill! Dump him and—so!"

Under different circumstances Andrew Hammer might have made it highly interesting even for a trio, but not now; taken completely off his guard, the sturdy blacksmith was thrown to the floor, his head muffled, his arms securely bound, thus taking away all power of resistance almost ere he could divine the peril which threatened.

The Dare-devil Sport's Double really seemed to be a past master in the art of surprising his enemies, and thus formed but another instance of his peculiar skill along those lines.

Andrew Hammer was overcome, then picked up and hustled off through the night, a brief pause being made at the point where the burro had been left in waiting; but only long enough to place the bewildered blacksmith astride the beast of burden, and to deftly secure him thus, making it an easier matter to convey him from town into the hills.

For no sooner was their latest captive placed in position than the trio turned face toward yonder hills, hurrying away through the night like evil beings who were in haste to complete their black night's work ere they could be interrupted by outsiders.

Hammer strove to cry out in hopes of calling friendly notice his way, but at the first sounds of that nature, a powerful hand sought his throat and the muzzle of a revolver was sent boring into his ribs, that grimly-croaking voice uttering the stern warning:

"Button-lip, fool! If you should fetch any one this way, 'twould only be to find your corpse! For—last warning!—I'll lift your roof at the first sign of an attempted rescue!"

There was no room for mistaking a warning so couched, and though he certainly was no coward, Andrew Hammer obeyed so far as making no further attempt to raise a hue-and-cry was concerned.

For some little time that hurried movement was maintained, and in spite of his thoroughly-blinded condition, Hammer knew from the motion that he was being conducted through the foot-hills, but in just what direction from Paradise Park he could only conjecture.

After what seemed an age of doubt and suspense, there came a break in that hurried journey, and Andrew Hammer was set free.

so far as the bonds which held him to the saddle was concerned.

As his feet struck earth once more he pretended to trip and stumble, but under cover of that cunning feint he made a desperate attempt to free his arms, as well as to break away from those hands which closed upon his person.

But all was useless. The grip only tightened, and the bonds held firm, while a stern voice sounded through that muffling hoodwink:

"Don't you try to play the fool, pardner! We haven't taken all this trouble to let it go waste through—Steady, or you'll be steadied! And after that you wouldn't sell for soapgrease, either!"

"I never—What're you gwine to do 'ith me?"

"Not swallow you alive, for one thing," came the mocking retort, as those strong hands forced him along for a few paces, then brought him up standing against the rough trunk of a tree.

"I don't—shorely, boss, I never done nothin' to—"

"Steady, Andy! You surely have done something, though!"

"What hev I done, then?"

"Lied all over yourself, for one thing!"

"I never—I never lied to nobody!"

"So you try to make out, Andy, but I'm going to prove you a notorious liar by the watch! Now—stand steady, please!" and that strong hand jammed the blacksmith back against that tree-trunk once more.

"Now, Mr. Hammer, just tell me one thing: didn't you publicly declare that Dare Deverell held up the hearse and robbed you all, on the Upper-crust trail?"

That strangely-croaking voice changed as through magic, and now the notes sounded familiar to the ears of the prisoner, from whose lips fell a startled cry:

"You—Dare-devil!"

"You—liar!" mocked the voice which now sounded so remarkably like that of the Paradise Sport. "Can't you tell the truth, even with your eyes shut, Andy Hammer? Shall I prove you the unconscionable prevaricator I've dubbed you, then?"

"I don't—how?" stammered the bewildered blacksmith.

"Steady, sol! Don't get too frisky, old man!" warned the Sport's Double, once more forcing his captive back against that tree-trunk. "Now for you, my modern Munchausen!"

"You swore that Dare Deverell turned that hold-up trick, didn't you?"

"Yes, and so he did—curse ye!" angrily growled the blacksmith.

"You talk just as though you really believed all that! But, if so, will you explain this much: Dare Deverell is back yonder in jail, while he who turned that neat trick is—see for yourself, liar!"

The hoodwink was jerked away, a match flashed up brightly, and lifting that cloth mask the Dare-devil Sport's Double held the tiny torch so as to cast its brightest light fairly upon his own face.

CHAPTER XIV.

"DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES!"

For barely a score of seconds that match lasted, but long enough to completely convince the amazed blacksmith, who gasped out:

"Dare Deverell, by blazes!"

That instant the light went out and as a mocking laugh sounded through the gloom, deft hands replaced that hoodwink and once again held the blacksmith powerless against the tree-trunk.

But Hammer was not thinking of escape, just then. His bewilderment at sight of that face—the face of Dare Deverell—the face of the audacious road agent who had held up the stage and robbed its living freight—was too intense for aught else.

"Deverell!" he repeated, voice sounding husky and far from natural as it came through that hoodwink. "Out hyar, while—How'd ye git out o' thar, anyway?"

Again that mocking laugh, now so startlingly like the voice of the Dare-devil Sport!

Then the blacksmith was held powerless while he who avowed himself the actual road-agent spoke on:

"You swore in the face of all Paradise that Dare Deverell held up the stage from

Upper-crust and robbed its passengers! You swore by all mankind holds in reverence that you recognized the robber by his voice and his face; you make solemn oath that by no possibility could you be mistaken in his identity!

"Now—your own senses are ample evidence that Dare Deverell is jailed, past the possibility of escape. You know that he is yonder, helpless, under an armed guard, while I am here, my own man, free as air!"

"You heard my voice, and pronounced it that of Dare Deverell! You have looked upon my face, and recognized it as belonging to the Dare-devil Sport! All this, yet you dare aver yourself a man of probity and rigid truth!"

"Holy ghost!" muttered Hammer, completely dumfounded.

"One of two things is certain: either you lied maliciously when you charged Dare Deverell with turning that trick, or else you made a clumsy blunder which might easily cut short the life of a gentleman whose little finger out values your whole carcass by a million-fold!"

"Now, Andrew Hammer, if a deliberate liar, you merit punishment. If a stupid blunderer, you ought to be severely reprimanded lest you repeat your mistake when it cannot be so easily remedied. And so—prepare him for the reward, brethren!"

Strong hands closed upon the blacksmith, and then, as though for the first time a realization of his actual peril came upon him, Andrew Hammer struggled and fought as desperately as his bonds would permit; but all was in vain.

He was turned to face that tree-trunk, and then bound tightly to it with ropes which seemed strong enough to restrain a mad elephant.

Then, bit by bit the clothes which covered his person were cut away and stripped down until his back was laid bare to the night air.

When this was done, he who spoke in the tones of the Dare-devil Sport, and bore the face of Dare Deverell, uttered the words:

"Taking all things into consideration, Mr. Hammer, you have proved to be the most damaging of all witnesses in this case against Dare Deverell.

"You swore to seeing and recognizing his face, even as you swore the voice he spoke with was perfectly familiar to your ears.

"You were first to recognize the horse the road-agent best rode, and you found the cast-off shoe, to which you swore you could make Bible oath.

"Now, there is a bare possibility that you were altogether honest in all this, for I frankly admit that such a resemblance exists: that I do resemble Dare Deverell in both face and voice; but I just as positively declare that I, not Deverell, turned that trick for which he has received all the credit—or otherwise!"

"I can't—ef you hain't him, then—you're the devil!" fairly exploded the bewildered blacksmith.

"Can a man be in two distinct places at one and the same time?" quickly demanded the Unknown. "You know that I am here, while reason tells you that Deverell is yonder in jail, under an armed guard who would not hesitate a moment about shooting him dead in his tracks should the Sport try to break away!"

"Now, Mr. Hammer, pay close attention, please.

"I robbed that hearse and shot Pope Carroll, not Dare Deverell. I used the Sport as a cats-paw, I'm free to admit, but that part of the neat little game is my concern, alone!"

"I've brought you out here wholly and solely for the purpose of clearing your mental vision, and impressing an enduring lesson upon your dangerous memory. So—ready, gentlemen?"

"And waiting, John Smith!" came the prompt response from the lips of the lesser mask.

"Then—read this witness the lesson he so richly deserves!"

With stinging force a lithe sprout fell across that bared back, causing the hoodwinked man to flinch with pain and cry out with surprise.

In swift succession fell the blows, one man standing on either side of their writhing

victim, maliciously enjoying their work as they struck in unison with that rising and sinking hand.

Those stinging strokes never ceased, never slackened in the slightest until blood began to show through that discolored skin, and Andrew Hammer was striped from neck to waist.

"Hold!" at length commanded "John Smith," and the floggers stepped back a pace or two, casting aside their worn switches and rubbing arms to take the kinks out of their well-exercised muscles.

"One more word before parting, Mr. Hammer," said the leader in those queer movements. "You've paid penalty for lying, or for being cursed with a wretched memory."

"Cuss ye all!" hoarsely panted the sufferer, writhing as he stood at the tree. "Ef ever I git a chaine to play even—"

"Make the most of it, for you'll never find a second one," coolly cut in John Smith, with a brief chuckle following his words.

"Now—business! We're through with you, for the present. We're going our way, and intend leaving you here to take your chances.

"If you can contrive to free yourself, well and good! If you fail in that attempt, possibly some one will stumble across you before thirst and hunger puts you past helping!"

"Be all that as it may, don't forget one thing, my dear brother!"

"Always give the devil his dues, but take care not to add to his rightful burden!"

"Mind you don't make oath that Dare Deverell administered this bit of a lesson, for since he's yonder in jail, he surely couldn't be out here, enjoying himself after this fashion!"

"Now, Andy, sweet; free yourself if you can, but if not—well, pray that some of your loose friends may find you before the mountain wolves strip your hide off and polish your bones!"

Ending with another mocking laugh, John Smith turned away from that spot, accompanied by his fellows, neither of the trio paying further heed to the muffled cries or fruitless struggles of the flogged blacksmith.

Bill Davis, who evidently bore Andrew Hammer a deep grudge, chuckled and gesticulated in high glee as they moved further away through the night, finally to break forth with the words:

"Great glory to the ram! Blamed ef I've hed so much fun sence I done ketched the eetch!"

"Better do your laughing now, pardner, for if you let it show on your sweet mug when Andy Hammer comes ramping and champing through Paradise, red-hot for revenge—well, rather you than me, anyway?" grimly warned he who had given himself the name of John Smith.

"That's all right, boss, an' I'd take a lick-in' most any time for the good o'—Keerful, thar, pardner!"

"What's the matter, now?" harshly demanded Smith, recoiling involuntarily, it seemed, as Davis made a vigorous grab at his arm.

"Matter 'nough ef I hedn't—Great glory, man!" pointing just ahead at a thinly masked opening which showed by the uncertain light. "Thar's the old shaft—hundred foot deep ef a inch!"

"And only for you I might have blundered right into it!" exclaimed the chief in that queer expedition, voice visibly changing the while.

"Waal, it did kind o' look that way! An' you wouldn't never have come back to kick 'bout it, nuther!"

"So deep? And—if one should fall down the shaft?" asked John Smith, cautiously moving closer to the edge of the opening, seemingly impelled by the morbid curiosity so often felt under similar circumstances.

"He wouldn't come out ontel ole Gabriel toots!"

"Show me how—Closer, please!"

Davis unsuspectingly obeyed, bending over that opening, but only for a moment; for then, with devilish swiftness, the Dare-devil Sport's Double struck the betrayed jailer a terrible blow on the bent head with a

clubbed revolver, sending the poor fellow headlong down the deserted shaft!

The lesser mask started back with a half-smothered cry of surprise or of horror, and in one hand flashed forth a revolver; but John Smith lifted an empty hand as he wheeled from the shaft, speaking in steady, contemptuous tones:

"Don't you play the fool, pardner!"

"But—I never—we didn't agree to—it's murder, man!" the smaller mask stammered, his free hand mechanically rising as though to brush away the cold sweat that atrocious deed had caused to start out upon his forehead.

He forgot that his face was still covered by that clown mask.

"Bah!" and still stronger scorn sounded in those deep tones. "It's common prudence, rather! Why pay the fool, after making full use of him?"

"But—I never—"

"And he will never—repeat what he had learned this night," was the cool interruption once more. "There's one old saying that I most thoroughly believe in, pardner, and that is this: 'Dead men tell no tales,' and I'll take my oath Bill Davis will hardly break that rule!"

CHAPTER XV.

A THOROUGHLY PUZZLED SPORT.

FOR the second time within a comparatively short period, Dare Deverell was left alone in bonds to free himself or fare worse.

And now, as then, he was most completely puzzled, striving in vain to decide just why this double of his should take such extraordinary pains to wrap the toils around him.

For, beyond a reasonable doubt, all this was carefully intended to work him further harm in the estimation of all honest citizens.

"Who is he, anyway? Can it be—Knox Bassett?"

If the light had been clearer! If he might only have felt as well as gazed!

"Did he wear a mask underneath that black cloth? Was even that likeness but another cunning trick?"

Question after question, wonder upon wonder flashed swiftly across that busy brain during the first few minutes after the Double had taken his departure; but all seemed wasted, so far as clearing away those puzzling mists of uncertainty was concerned.

From what little he had been permitted to see, Deverell knew that this daring trickster bore a more or less strong resemblance to himself in face, as in voice and figure.

That naturally turned his thoughts toward the gambler, Knox Bassett, but then came the query:

If really that man, would he so ostentatiously proclaim the fact? Would he not use means directly opposite, in order to turn suspicion from rather than toward himself?

"If I was only free to follow him! I'd tear the whole truth out of the devil, or leave him just fit for fiddle-strings."

His bodily powers fairly restored, now, Dare Deverell fell to work at his bonds once more, bringing all his muscles into play, hoping to burst a coil or, failing that, to make knot slip or stretch sufficiently far to enable him to wrest a hand loose, just as he had done on a former occasion.

But matters seemed to be different now. His Double had been more careful in tying knots, else the stuff those bonds were made of was far better material than those employed over by the stage route.

Strain and struggle as he might, the result was the same: failure, utter and complete!

Only when this was proven past all doubts did Dare Deverell give over his efforts for the time being, lying there by that rock, breathing quickly heavily, more angry row than ever.

He felt that he would gladly sacrifice one of his good hands for the bare privilege of facing that Double, man against man!

Still, little by little that vicious rage passed away, leaving the Sport cooler and clearer-witted, if in no more amiable mood so far as his audacious Double was concerned.

Again he ran over in mind all that had happened him since first catching sight of that golden lure.

Every step against himself had been taken with such devilish art that failure was discounted.

All this was certainly the work of an

enemy. But why go to so much trouble? Why add to his own risk so greatly, if only revenge against a hated enemy was wanted?

"Like this: why didn't he knock me in the head there in jail, and so have done with it, all in a heap?"

Then came the remembrance of what that Double had hinted at, rather than positively declared: that through all he was working to blast reputation rather than take life!

Was that true, or merely part of the malicious scheme?

And then—what about a murdered jailer?

Just then a faint puff of wind brought the scent of burning fuse more distinctly to his nostrils, and shaking his head until that muffler was cast fairly aside, Dare Deverell twisted his head far enough around to catch a glimpse of a tiny spark of red fire!

That, then, was no lie! The fuse was alight, and slowly creeping nearer his back, to—do what?

Weaken his bonds by burning, or end all by an explosion of some powerful agent hidden behind his body?

That idea caused a brief chill to creep over the bound man, but he as quickly banished the preposterous feeling.

"If the cunning devil meant that sort of ending, wouldn't he have let fall some hint or else told me outright, to add torture to the rest? And yet—oh, curse the rascal anyway!"

Like one fascinated by the malignant eye of charming serpent, Dare Deverell lay quiet for a space, watching that red spark and making mental note of its rate of progress.

That seemed marvelously slow, to burn with such clearness, such steadiness, and he caught himself wondering as to its composition.

It seemed to take minutes to move at all perceptibly, and taking that as a base for his calculations, the Sport fell to figuring as to how long he must lie there helpless while waiting for the fire to perform the duty allotted it.

Unless—was that, too, part and parcel of this abominable trick?

"Did he tell me that, just to keep me from working free after my own fashion, wonder?"

And believing that this was the actual solution, Deverell once more put forth all his efforts, straining his muscles and testing sinews until it really seemed as though the tightly drawn skin must split asunder.

Only to fail as signally as before, and fairly convinced now that escape without some sort of outside aid was literally impossible, the Dare-devil Sport resigned himself to waiting with what scant grace he could summon.

And then, as moments grew into minutes, and minutes counted up the hours as told by yonder twinkling stars, Dare Deverell again fell to pondering this ugly mystery in which he so unexpectedly found himself involved.

Could it possibly be that there was still another man in that vicinity who bore such a remarkable resemblance to himself?

Surely Knox Bassett would not so audaciously invite a facial comparison, yet leave room for an accounting, later on? Unless—could that be the correct solution?

Little by little Dare Deverell felt that he was clearing away the puzzling mists, that he was beginning to see why this, his audacious counterfeit, had acted after such a queer fashion.

"It's Bassett, right enough!" was his final conclusion. "And he is counting on covering his own tracks—on hiding his own guilt by getting me still deeper into the nasty mix!"

Why else had that double so pointedly warned him to flee from that neighborhood without returning to Paradise Park, under penalty?

"Too thin, my cunning knave! Wouldn't that flight fasten suspicion all the more tightly upon myself? Of course! And—well, maybe I'll foolish you, after all, Knox Bassett!"

And then, feeling that his sole hope lay in that slowly creeping spark of fire, Dare Deverell waited with what patience he could summon, although it was a terribly trying ordeal, taking it clear through.

Would the fuse do the work assigned it? Had his Double been in earnest when he

spoke of that method of shedding those bonds?

Time alone could answer, and that time seemed an eternity!

But then Deverell could feel the fire almost touching his flesh, and though it gradually began to burn and eat through the skin, he stood the slow torture as stoically as ever an Indian brave at stake.

Once, twice, he put the bonds to the test, only to find them as firm and unyielding as of yore. But then, after another weary spell of waiting and hoping, he made a third essay which proved to be the charm!

The cord gave way with an audible snap, and after that freedom was readily won, so far as his limbs were concerned.

When Dare Deverell sprang to his feet at last, he saw that the long night had worn itself away, and that the day was dawning, the eastern gray beginning to exhibit streaks of gold and crimson!

"Now—which is it?" the Sport muttered, stretching his partially benumbed arms and kicking with first one leg, then another, to quicken their circulation. "Run and live, stay and croak?"

It took but an instant to decide that question, even if it had been a matter of doubt at all, which is unlikely.

"I'd give a pretty penny for a gun or two, but—here goes!"

There was little difficulty in deciding what direction to pursue, for almost his first glance around settled the proper line to take, and a minute later the Dare-devil Sport was heading straight for Paradise Park, ready to take what fate might hold in store.

"If I can manage to get back inside the jug before the town finds out my absence!"

That was his hope, now, and with it went a fair degree of malicious pleasure as he tried to picture the ugly disappointment his Double would experience when realizing how completely he had been foiled in that one respect.

"Of course he lied about the jailer being dead! Why kill him? What good could that do his plans? Surely not enough to justify the added sin of cold-blooded murder! And—didn't Winston himself jump all over my back—confound him!"

That ugly doubt still remained in spite of all his efforts to banish the thought; but Deverell never faltered, his resolve once fairly taken.

If he could only return to the jail, unseen, unchecked!

The dawn had fairly come by the time he reached the outskirts of Paradise Park, but as yet the town seemed sleeping. If any citizens were astir as yet, not one was visible to those swiftly roving eyes; and with a long breath of relief Dare Deverell came into sight of his prison.

His hopes seemed fairly assured, now, but—it was not to be!

When hardly two-score yards separated him from the jail, he was covered by a revolver in the hands of a burly shape, and a stern voice said:

"Steady, Deverell! Lift a finger and I'll blow you through!"

CHAPTER XVI

A DIRE DISCOVERY.

THE man with the revolver was none other than Reuben Jax, and as the Dare-devil Sport recognized the speaker, his empty hands went up in good shape.

"Don't waste a cartridge, pardner," he called out, though feeling a fierce disappointment at having his rising hopes so suddenly foiled.

"Play white, then!" sternly warned the detective, moving nearer, all the time holding the drop like one who has fair reason for expecting trick or struggle.

"That's what I'm trying my little best to do, Mr. Jax, and if you'd held your hush a minute longer—"

"What are you doing out here, on the loose, anyway, Deverell?" demanded the detective, now almost within arm's length of the Sport.

Dare flashed an uneasy look around on all sides, for even yet he could not entirely abandon all hope of in a measure foiling his audacious Double.

Detective Jax mistook that glance, and sternly spoke:

"Don't you try it on, Deverell! I'd really hate to shoot you, but I'm taking no long chances with a man of your dimensions."

"Oh, come off!" with an impatient echo in his tones. "Wouldn't you take a tumble if a house was to hit you, man? Instead of running away, I've come back—"

"From where? How did you get out? Who helped you—"

"Shoot 'em at me one by one, pardner! And—come inside, where we may chin-chin without all Paradise coming to take notes!"

As he spoke thus, Dare Deverell turned once more toward the jail, giving no heed to that leveled revolver, which Detective Jax kept in close proximity to his person all the while.

The Sport touched the door, hardly daring to hope that it was free to open, but giving vent to a little cry of triumph as it swung on hinges with no further resistance than its own weight.

"Good as old wheat! Come in, Jax, and we'll— Hello, there!"

The detective was close behind the Sport, and as Deverell paused, somewhat as though he meant to back out again, the detective's free hand gave him a vigorous push, at the same time saying:

"Go ahead, Deverell! If you want—What's the matter, anyway?"

That open door permitted a fair quantity of light to enter, but the interior of the jail still remained darker than most buildings, thanks to its manner of construction.

Deverell saw a human shape lying on the floor close by the cot which he himself had occupied earlier in the night just spent, and it was this sight which caused his involuntary recoil.

Still thinking mainly of keeping his prisoner safe, Detective Jax drew the door to as he himself crossed the threshold, and that deepened the natural obscurity at that early hour.

Still, both men could see that yonder shape lay like one lost in unusually sound sleep or—was it death?

The significant hint let fall by his Double now recurred to the mind of the Dare devil Sport, and a curious thrill crept through him—a premonition of coming disaster!

"It's Winston!" he cried, hoarsely, stepping nearer that silent shape as he added: "Looks like something had happened, but—I'll see!"

Detective Jax stood just within the door, pistol in hand and keenly on guard the while.

There was something about this affair which made him feel uneasy, and until those facts were made clear to—

"Good God!" exclaimed Deverell, shrinking back from that motionless heap of what had once been humanity. "It's Winston, but—he's dead!"

Detective Jax likewise recoiled, but with a vastly different motive for the action, and his revolver held the Sport covered while he sternly cried in warn:

"Steady, there! None of your cunning tricks, for I'll—"

"Heavens, man!" hoarsely interrupted Deverell, his face showing unusually pale by that dim light as he made a passionate gesture. "I only wish it was a trick! Don't I tell you—Winston's dead!"

"Then—who killed him?"

"How do I know? He is—why don't you do something, man?" excitedly cried the Sport, seeming fairly upset by that dire discovery.

As he spoke thus, he moved toward the detective, and loth to shoot down an unarmed man, yet determined to prevent what he believed to be an effort to escape, Detective Jax sprang swiftly back, through the door that responded to his touch; and which he as quickly clanged to at his own heels.

Then, lifting his revolver he fired every chamber into the air, taking the surest as well as quickest means of rousing the whole town that lay in his power.

Meanwhile, Dare Deverell was inside the jail, with nothing further from his thoughts than escape by flight.

Indeed, he took no thoughts for himself, just then, his entire mind being filled with horror at the awful discovery he had just made.

While those swiftly following shots stung the early morning air he stood like one petrified, but then, as the stentorian voice of Detective Jax rung out as a supplementary alarm, he broke that ugly spell, and once again turned to that horribly silent shape.

He knew that death was beforehand with him, yet he could not believe! Surely it was all a hideous mistake! A grim jest which—

But no! Again he felt that rigid flesh, so unlike that of a sleeping mortal! Again he looked into that awfully distorted visage: saw the bitten lips, the swollen tongue, the staring eyeballs!

Not only was the unfortunate jailer dead, but everything about the corpse went to indicate a death of far more than ordinary agony.

His bound arms were cramped and the purpled nails had cut through the thick and horn-like covering of both palms.

Upon his bristling beard still remained traces of thick and viscous froth: just such saliva as one may note upon the jowls of a dog which has died of rabies!

Or—of poison!

As he thought of this, Dare Deverell shrunk away with a half-stifled cry, pausing only when he touched the opposite wall with his shivering shoulders, where he stood staring like one spellbound, unable to turn his aching eyes away from that gruesome spectacle.

Meanwhile, the alarm given by Detective Jax was spreading swiftly through Paradise Park, and even so soon a number of early risers were seen by Reuben hurrying in that direction, guided to the jail almost as much by instinct as through that fusilade and accompanying shout.

"What's broke loose, Jax?" demanded the first comer, one hand gripping a revolver which, mining-camp fashion, he might almost be said to sleep with.

"Devil to pay, seems like!" came the uneasy answer from the man-hunter as he stood guard before that nail-studded door.

"Not a jail-break, is it?"

"That, or still worse! Hurry up, you fellows! There's work for all honest citizens in this nasty mix, or I'm 'way off my base! And—who knows where to find a doctor?"

"Hyar he comes, hippety-hop like a foun-dered horn-toad!" recklessly called forth another of those early birds. "Who's ketched a fit or got a baby, boss?"

"Hold 'em steady, as you know how, Mr. Timberlake," hurriedly muttered the detective, singling out one of the more reputable citizens for that duty, which might well prove a difficult one when the ugly truth should become known to that increasing crowd.

"And you, sir?"

"I'm going back in yonder, for Deverell is— Call to your aid only such men as you can thoroughly depend upon, and above all things permit no rush of—lynchers!"

That final word came in a guarded whisper, but the detective's face betrayed his intense anxiety, and already part of that gathering crowd was demanding a clearer explanation.

"What's gone bu'st, anyway? Who was shootin' like—an' what is it all fer? That's what we want to know!"

"An' knowin' of it in a holy hurry, too!"

"If not, why not?" demanded one, still bolder than his mates who had made themselves heard before him. "We'll go inside the jug and see for ourselves—eh, mates?"

"Stand back, all!" sternly warned the detective, gun in hand the better to enforce his commands. "You shall know all, gentlemen, but for a little while—have patience!"

"Don't try to crowd, please," coolly supplemented Mr. Timberlake, now with a half score of good backers ranging in front of that door. "Our corns are mighty tender, and if trampled on—well, somebody will have to swallow pills!"

By this time Dr. Hooper had won his way to the spot, and opening the door just wide enough to admit himself, Detective Jax bade the man of medicine to stand ready to slip inside close at his heels, then stepped across that threshold, quickly covered the Sport with his revolver as he spoke, sternly:

"No more foolishness, Deverell! If you try to kick—"

The prisoner gave a start, brushing one

unsteady hand across his damp brows like one just rousing out of a trance; then he hoarsely spoke:

"My God, man! Will you never understand? I never—he's dead!"

"Who killed him, then?" almost fiercely demanded the detective, now close to the half-dazed Sport, his unarmed hand slipping cautiously into a side-pocket where his fingers closed upon a polished bit of steel mechanism.

"I didn't—before heaven I never harmed the poor fellow, Jax!" huskily vowed the Sport, still staring at yonder cold shape like one who could not break that awful fascination. "That devil who—he said—what was it he did say, though?"

By this time Detective Jax had fully made up his mind to the proper course for him to pursue, and while those horror-widened eyes were corpse-held, he slipped pistol back into place, drawing forth a pair of handcuffs instead.

Then, with practiced skill he snapped those irons in place, rendering his man helpless before his dazed wits could fairly realize what those rude touches actually meant.

Deverell stared at those manacles, then up at the red face of the man-hunter, something of his wonted energy making itself seen and heard as he fairly exploded:

"Why, you infernal—bah! Would I have come back here, as I did, if I meant to make a breakaway, you ass?"

"That's all right, Mr. Deverell," doggedly retorted the detective, stepping back a pace to stand on guard. "Fast bind, fast find! You may mean all right, but—does that look like it?"

One fat hand pointed toward the corpse of the luckless jailer, from beside which the asthmatic little doctor was just arising, his preliminary examination over.

Dare Deverell saw that action and retained his wits sufficiently to read the movement aright.

Paying no notice to his irons or his captor, then, he moved a step nearer the man of medicine, huskily speaking:

"You know, doctor! Is he—surely there is some hope left for the poor fellow? Surely he isn't—not clear dead?"

"He is dead, and has been for several hours," came the grave reply, given without the slightest hesitation.

"My God! And—what killed him, doctor?"

"Yes; what caused his death, Hooper?" added Detective Jax.

"He was poisoned—killed by a heavy dose of strychnine!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THIRSTING FOR REVENGE.

THOSE shots fired in front of the jail reached ears outside of Paradise Park, but he who caught the sounds merely paused for a half-score seconds, staring in that direction with blood-shot eyes, muttered something which seemed a cross between curse and groan, then staggered on once more, bent on a single purpose.

That personage was none other than Andrew Hammer, blacksmith and worker in iron, whose bare back showed red and inflamed in the early dawn.

He had fought desperately for liberty, wrestling with his bonds until he was well nigh exhausted before success came his way. Then, worn and haggard, looking years older than he had the evening before receiving that visit, Hammer started off in the direction of town, fiercely thirsting for full and ample revenge.

"Licked! Licked wuss'n any sheep-kill-in'houn' dog! Spit onto, and then rubbed it clean in! Made a monkey of by—who, durn'em? Who?"

Right there lay the one point which gave him the worst trouble: he could not really believe Dare Deverell would be guilty of such a dastardly assault, and yet—that face, voice, eyes!

"Ef not; ef the Sport's all this time tight-held in yonder—then who was the bloody cuss? Was it Bassett? Ef nyther one not t'other, then 'twas the devil him own self!"

After this fashion it was that Andrew Hammer came back home, staring dully toward

the jail, as he listened to the growing hum of human voices which appeared to center in that quarter, but even now failing to recognize the truth; revenge was all his mind had room for, just now.

His rude little shack was just as it had been left by the abductors, and stumbling half-blindly across that threshold, the beaten blacksmith found little difficulty in laying hands upon what he most required, just then: a brace of loaded revolvers!

Coming back to the light, Hammer made sure the tools were in good working order, then backed up to the bit of mirror tacked against one side of the shanty, looking over a shoulder for a glimpse at his livid back.

A grating curse greeted that sight, and seemingly lent a fresh store of strength by what he saw, the blacksmith hurried away from his rude home, heading as directly as possible for the Paradise jail.

Before even that none too great distance could be covered, however, Hammer learned that something beyond the ordinary was taking place, and those to whom he exhibited his bruised back showed far less interest than might have followed on any other occasion.

"There's something gone wrong at the jail!" one of those excited friends said while hurrying along in that direction. "Deverell's skipped, or croaked, or—something, anyhow!"

The more sluggish blacksmith followed after, still bent on that one purpose: learning to whom he owed such a deep debt of vengeance.

He saw the crowd gathered in front of the jail, moving restlessly to and from, those units constantly changing position yet the whole remaining in the same spot; held at bay by Reuben Jax, Amos Timberlake, aided by half-score sturdy and honest citizens whose stern faces and ready guns formed an impenetrable barrier as yet.

The blacksmith listened for a few moments, trying to catch at least an inkling of the truth through those excited sentences, all blending together and making confusion worse confounded.

"Open up an' show us, blame ye!" yelled one strong-lunged individual, whose hair looked as though he had slept in a hay-mow over night.

"That's right, too!" cried another. "If there's no gum-game going on, why not prove it? Show up, or—we'll open up ourselves!"

"Where's the Sport? If he hasn't been sneaked out o' town—"

The suspicion served as a keen spur to the blacksmith, and springing into fierce life once more, he shouldered a passage through crowded lines, hoarsely crying aloud:

"Make way! Cl'ar the track fer—I'm got somethin' to say, an' it's gwine to be said hard, too!"

"Holy smoke!" exploded one of those units as sight was caught of that thoroughly-laced back. "Will ye look at his sign-board, now!"

"Stand back, please!" sternly warned Detective Jax as Hammer forged to the front. "No crowding, sir, or else—Will you stand back?"

Instead, the blacksmith cleared a space around himself by a vigorous use of his arms, then turned broad back toward those armed guards, twisting head to glare over his own shoulder as he hoarsely spoke:

"Will ye take a fair look at them, gents? See how I've bin licked! Me, Andy Hammer, white an' free-born! Licked—like a runaway nigger!"

That bruised and bleeding back spoke far louder and more plainly than its owner could, and Detective Jax gave a bit of a shiver as he took note; but he had his own troubles to care for, and so made reply:

"I'm sorry, sir, but—we've got nothing to do with that, and—"

"Yes ye hev got somethin' to do with it!" sternly cut in the injured iron-worker. "I'm tellin' ye why ye hev, so—listen, all!"

"A dirty devil done all this ye see; licked me wuss'n ary aig suckin', sheep-killin' houn' dog! Lied me out o' my own home an' bunk, tied me up like a pig in a poke, run me 'way out in the hill, an' then—look fer yerselves an' see how I was finished off, gents!"

Again he exhibited that wounded back and broad shoulders, and once more Detec-

tive Jax declared that they had naught to do with his hurts.

"I'm a-tellin' ye why ye hev, gents," persisted Hammer, brushing one grimy paw across his forehead, where drops of cold sweat shone in the first rays of the rising sun. "Fer him as done this dirty work, showed me the face of—who?"

A brief pause, filled by a glance over that eagerly-interested gathering, then Andrew Hammer added:

"I see the varmint's face when he held up a match fer jest that. I see it plain es I kin see you all right now! An'—ef it wasn't the face of Dare Deverell, 'twas that of Knox Bassett! Ef nyther o' them—waal, then it shorely must hev bin that of—the devil himself!"

An ugly muttering came from the crowd, and fearing lest actions might follow words, Detective Jax spoke in more placable tones:

"You're too strongly shaken to know just what it is you really want or say, Mr. Hammer, so I reckon you'd better go—"

"Wait," with a slow but impressive gesture. "I'm tellin' ye the critter who led the imps as used me all up like this, wore the head an' face of Dare Deverell. I called him that, and he swore I was a liar, sayin' that I could prove it by findin' the Sport right hyar in jail, whar he'd bin all the time!"

"Of course he was right and you mistaken, sir, so—"

"Wait, I'm tellin' ye, boss! Thar's no man livin' kin use me dirty like this 'thout me playin' even, at fu'st or at last, airy or slow! An' the fu'st proper step to take is to find out jest who I'm owin' of it all to. So—is Mr. Deverell in yender jail?"

"Of course he is, man alive! Can't you understand—"

"I'm tryin' to understand, yes," soberly cut in the vengeful blacksmith, stepping a bit closer that living barricade. "An' as the shorest way, gents, let me atep inside fer to speak a word with Mr. Deverell, him own self."

"Nonsense, man! Don't crowd, or you may get hurt!"

"I'm sayin' it, boss. I'm gwine in thar to see the Sport. Will you 'low me in, ca'm an' quiet, or shell I shoot a way open?"

A menacing roar came from the interested crowd, and one man cried:

"Let Andy inside, there, or we'll all open the way! Why not? Shall we all take a look inside the jug, mates?"

Detective Jax was swift to realize that he must yield to one or to many, and knowing from past experience that such a rush would almost certainly prove fatal to his prisoner, he made the best of a bad bargain, reaching out to touch an arm, as he spoke to Hammer:

"Come, then, if you only wish to speak with Mr. Deverell. Then you can assure these gentlemen—Have patience, please, men!"

The blacksmith gave no heed to the others, his one aim being to forever solve that mystery so far as the Dare-devil Sport was concerned; and when Detective Jax opened the door far enough to admit his burly shape, he quickly crowded through, passing from light into comparative obscurity.

He saw the cot occupied by the prone shape, but gave it only a glance in passing, for yonder stood the athletic figure of the Dare devil Sport, and without preface, Hammer spoke to Deverell:

"Look at my back, Sport, an' see ef ye kin recognize the hand-write. Take two thinks afore ye answer, fer thar's a heap 'pendin' onto it, I warn ye! Now—did you lick me like this, last night?"

"I did not," promptly answered Deverell, after a glance at that badly lacerated hide. "What makes you fancy anything like that, Hammer?"

"Wait, please. Ye hain't fergot what was said an' done, follerin' of the hold-up of the hearse. Ye hain't fergot what I said, nyther?"

"Of course not, although you—were mistaken in the man."

"Which is what I was tryin' to think, all the while," soberly said the blacksmith, licking his parched lips, then adding: "I tried to do an' say what was plum' right, fer I never raaally b'lieved you would play ary sech trick as that. I hed to tell what I

knowed, but was I so turrible bad to blame fer all that?"

"Of course not, Hammer; but your evidence bore mighty hard against the wrong man!"

"It was solid truth from start to finish, an' that's jest what I'm axin' of you right now, Mr. Deverell. Play me white, sir! You say you never didn't lick me this-a-way, last night?"

"I never did, Andy."

Hammer paused a moment or two, head sinking as if in reflection. Then he looked up again, steadily watching that handsome face before him while speaking on:

"I was roused up out of a soun' sleep, boss, last night. I didn't stop to see the time, but judgin' from the looks o' the moon, 'twas not fur from three o'clock when I was—licked!"

"Whar was you at three o'clock, last night, sir?"

No answer! Deverell's face flushed, then grew pale again.

The door opened far enough to admit the portly detective, grown uneasy through that delay; but neither man took note of his coming.

"Was you right in hyar, that time, sir?" persisted the blacksmith, varying his question a trifle as Deverell made no response.

"No, but—"

One of those grimy paws lifted in an imperious gesture, cutting the hesitating Sport short off.

"That's plenty, Mr. Deverell!" coldly declared Andrew Hammer, face looking gray and hard as he turned away from the embarrassed Sport, like one who feels his present mission has come to an end.

"But, I say, Hammer!"

"Let me out, will you, sir?" soberly asked the blacksmith, pushing past Detective Jax, swinging that heavy door open for himself. "I've got my answer, an' now—that settles it!"

Striking down the hand which would have detained him, Andrew Hammer crossed the threshold, pushing past the armed guards, paying no heed to look or query until he had won fairly free and was at the edge of that strongly curious crowd.

From thence came a flood of queries, mixed with cries and catcalls and humorous sounds; but Andrew Hammer certainly was not in a joking mood as he lifted one hairy arm, shaking it menacingly as he exploded:

"You know me, men, an' know that I hate a lie as I hate the devil! I come hyar, back ring-streak-an'-striped all over! I wanted to prove that Dare Deverell never done me dirt! But what comes of it? Jest this:

"In yender lays pore Jack Winston, dead, p'izened! An' who done it? Dare Deverell—no less! Now—what shell he ketch fer it all?"

"Lynch him! Hang him! Run him up a tree!" came a fierce chorus.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DARE-DEVIL SPORT IN DANGER.

LOUD and savage came that outbreak, yet the mob seemed hardly ripe for actual violence in the teeth of yonder armed guard, who certainly showed no signs of flinching, gave no hint of breaking away without at least a brisk fight for their position.

And once again Tracy Carroll pushed to the front in the role of peacemaker, begging the men of Paradise Park take cool thought before rushing to extremities.

"At least wait until the guilt is surely fastened upon the man for whose life-blood you are thirsting! Wait until it is dead sure you are not murdering an entirely innocent man, gentlemen!"

In cold, yet savage rage Andrew Hammer pushed up to the young man, calling attention to his wounded shoulders, then telling how he had offered Dare Deverell all the chance in the world.

"I talked to him as one gent to another. I played him white, an' only axed that he give me the same sort o' deal. An' then, when I wanted to know whar he was at the time I got all this—what?"

"Surely he was in jail, yonder?"

"Then why'd he lie an' say he wasn't?" fiercely cried the blacksmith, that forced composure once more failing him as his

wrongs were thus recalled. "An' thar lay pore Jack Winston, dead, cramped up, showin' the face of a man who'd bin killed by strychnine ef ever a critter did!"

Tracy Carroll recoiled with a low exclamation of horror, for this savage hint seemed more than he was prepared for, just then.

Meanwhile, Dare Deverell and Reuben Jax were alone together there in the jail, briefly silent during that fierce outburst when the mob was howling for blood like so many wolves in human guise; but as that ominous uproar died away without fetching an actual charge upon the armed guard, the two men had time for thought and for further explanation.

As yet Dare Deverell had made no full defense, simply because there had been no time for such.

All had been a swift, dizzying, perplexing whirl ever since the discovery of that corpse; but now the detective took time to ask:

"How did it all happen, anyway, Deverell? I can't believe you would poison—"

"Stop!" sharply, almost fiercely cried the Dare-devil Sport, eyes filling with fire at that allusion. "I'll break your back if you even dare hint such a thing, sir!"

Detective Jax recoiled a bit, but he made no move toward his guns, speaking quickly and gravely instead:

"Wait until I make such a foul insinuation, please! I can't think you guilty of such an atrocious deed, even to win your freedom, Deverell!"

"As Heaven hears me, sir, I never harmed poor Winston, in any way, shape or manner," earnestly vowed the endangered Sport.

"If I really believed you did, Deverell, instead of trying to defend you as I am now doing, curse me if I wouldn't throw the door wide and invite the mob right in to stretch your neck!" impulsively cried the man-hunter, evidently feeling this tragedy acutely.

"And you would be right in so acting," admitted the Sport, shivering a bit as he glanced across to where the dead jailer was lying, pain-distorted face hidden under an end of the blanket.

"Of course you never, but some one surely did! The poor fellow never tied himself up like that, to say nothing of the dose! But—who did it, and what for?"

"To damn me still deeper, of course!" exploded Deverell, making a fierce gesture as he spoke. "That mocking devil! This is what he meant when he spoke of blasting, not killing! Oh, if I only might—"

Intense passion choked his further utterance, and Detective Jax improved the opportunity to ask:

"How'd it all come about, anyway, Deverell? You haven't—to be sure there's hardly been time for an explanation, though!"

The Sport glanced toward the front of the jail as another ominous outcry was heard, then grimly spoke:

"That doesn't sound as though there'd be any too much time for explanations now, either! I say, pardner?"

"What is it, Deverell?"

"If the worst comes to the worst, give me a show for my stake, won't you?"

"You mean?"

"That I'd heap sight rather die like a man, fighting, than like a cornered rat, unable to even use my teeth! If there's a rush to lynch, give me anyway one gun?"

"Oh, it hasn't gone nearly that far yet," evasively replied the man-hunter, though he could not entirely conceal his own uneasiness as to the final outcome. "Time enough to decide when—but you started to explain how all this happened, Deverell?"

That outcry had now died away, and seeing that they were granted another breathing spell, the Dare-devil Sport complied with the wishes of his captor, as far as lay in his power.

He mentioned the coming of the second jailer, Bill Davis, and then went to give his view of all that followed.

"One or both of the jailers jumped me, first off," he declared, positively. "Others came in and piled on top, but I can make

oath that both Winston and Davis knew of the trick before it was turned!"

"That's mighty important, if you've made no mistake," thoughtfully commented the portly detective. "I haven't noticed Davis around, as yet, either!"

"Find him, pinch him, make him tell just who else was in the nasty mix," earnestly adjured the Sport; then going on with his recital.

He told all he knew, making no reservation whatever, for just now it was his dearest wish and hope to have the entire mystery brought to light, for by no other means could he expect to clear his own fair fame of this abominable crime.

When he came to that brief unmasking, Deverell added, forcibly:

"There's only one other man in all this section who bears a face so nearly the image of mine, and that is Knox Bassett! Before high heaven I believe all this devil's work is his! I charge him with trapping me, with flogging Andy Hammer, with murdering poor Winston, yonder!"

Detective Jax lifted a hand, speaking gravely:

"Stop! You're wrong there, Deverell. Bassett couldn't have done all this, for he isn't in town. I saw him take the Upper-crust stage myself!"

Deverell gave a start at this positive assurance, but rallied even more quickly, to cry:

"All the better proof, man! Hunt him out! Make him show just when and how and where he left that stage, and if you don't find him the cunning devil who's at the bottom of all this queer mix, then I'll—"

Just then a swift rapping sounded against the jail door, which almost immediately swung open to grant admittance to Tracy Carroll, whose unusually pale face and excited demeanor spoke ill for the future of this endangered Sport.

"Hark!" he said, huskily, as again that howl for human blood broke bonds without. "I fear 'tis all too late, but—save him, Mr. Jax!"

"That's what I'm trying to do, sir," gruffly retorted the detective. "What fetches you in here, though?"

"I thought—surely he'll need every honest man to help fight back these howling demons! And—if he should be—if harm should come to him after this fashion, 'twould be the death of my poor father!"

Carroll seemed hardly aware of what he said, but there was little room left for doubting his intense earnestness, and a bit of moisture came into the Sport's eyes as he stepped forward to clasp one of those hands, simply saying:

"I thank you, sir! Just how deeply we'll let the future show."

"If there is any future!" sharply cried Carroll, as those ugly sounds increased rather than died away without. "I say, Jax, why don't you sound a call for all honest men to rally and defend this—the jail?"

"Well, I reckon we've got about all who favors this side of the affair," coolly replied the man-hunter, looking to his weapons once more.

"But—impossible! Surely the more reputable citizens would—"

"You hear them right now," interjected Reuben Jax, with a grim smile listening. "Those are our most reputable citizens, and just now they'd be among the very foremost to grab hold of the rope when a noose is fitted about the neck of Mr. Deverell!"

"Because they deem me guilty of—that!" said Deverell, motioning toward yonder silent shape resting upon the prison cot. "If I was—"

"And you—you are innocent, Deverell?" asked Carroll, huskily.

"Before God and man I am wholly innocent!"

"Then—let me out again, Jax! I'll do what I can. I believe I can effect— Give me a fair chance to save his life, sir, if only for my poor old father's sake!"

Tracy Carroll betrayed far less nerve than either of the others, but this was strange life for a man from the quiet East, and perhaps he ought not to be blamed so severely.

Still, Detective Jax made no opposition to that retreat, as he deemed it, and then the two men were again left alone together.

The sight of Tracy Carroll coming forth from the spot from which they were barred, seemed to set the human pack wild again, and their hoots and yells, their cries and curses and threats burst forth with redoubled fury.

All the mob lacked was a leader, and that would surely be supplied ere many more minutes should creep along.

Very pale and still, but otherwise betraying no lack of nerve, the Dare devil Sport waited while Detective Jax looked over his weapons, and then he repeated the plea he had made before.

"Give me my guns—or even one of them—and let me face the howlers, pardner. That is the easiest way out of it for all the rest of you, and I'll take care of myself."

"Not yet, Deverell."

"But—you will not leave me to be butchered without a show?"

"No. I'll die defending you," grimly declared the detective.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOWLING OF HUMAN WOLVES.

VISIBLY shaken by powerful emotions, Tracy Carroll passed through the little squad of law-defenders, making gestures of amity as he was fairly pelted with howls and cries and various questions by the excited crowd.

For a brief space it really looked as though the new-comer in Paradise would meet with worse, but then he contrived to slip through the front rank, and thus became less prominent as a target.

Simon Whitehead was there by now, active as ever, his maliciously vicious tongue doing all it could to raise those ugly passions past the danger-mark.

With physical courage to back him up, the foxy little lawyer would have made a dangerous leader for any such movement, but his lack of grit and want of magnetism rendered his evil efforts of less avail right now than would have been the case otherwise.

Still, Simon found plenty of ears open to willingly drink in his verbal poison, and voices to sound in louder notes the cry for justice which he originated.

A surge by that uneasy crowd carried the lawyer into close contact with his fellow-passenger's son shortly after Tracy left the jail, and eager to turn all to account just so long as he might secure revenge for his robbery, Whitehead cried out in shrill accents:

"Speech! Tell us what you saw in yonder, Mr. Carroll! Listen, men! Now we can learn how— Was poor Jack Winston really poisoned by Dare Deverell, sir!"

Tracy Carroll seemed desirous of avoiding any such prominence, just then, but Simon had caught the crowd, and a score of sturdy voices took up the cry, demanding a speech.

Finding there was no fair method of dodging out of it, Carroll spoke briefly, putting in an urgent plea for less haste and more mercy.

"It's true that something's happened to poor Winston, but I can't make it seem that Mr. Deverell would be guilty of such an atrocious crime as poisoning the jailer! I saw the body, but—"

"Give him a dose o' the same medicine, boys!" roared out one lusty fellow, swinging aloft a battered hat the more surely to attract attention from his fellows.

"Peace, gentlemen! For love of common humanity don't act so rashly! Don't in your rage do what you may weep tears of blood in sorrow for, later on!"

"If Deverell is really guilty of this deed—"

"Who else could have done it?" shrilly squealed Simon Whitehead, making his notes heard even above that ugly roar from a hundred throats.

"That's what you ought to find out, first of all!" earnestly declared Carroll, although he must have felt his was a losing fight. "Deverell says he did not harm his jailer, but that—"

"He tries to shove it all off on another!" finished the little lawyer. "He swears that Knox Bassett did it all, and that he is meek and persecuted like—bah! Cur as well as criminal!"

"It's a cur yelping right now, gentlemen!" cried Carroll, one hand pointing toward that malignant. "Don't hearken to the likes of

him, but listen to the voice of humanity! Don't act blindly so long as you have the power to hold all level while determining just where the weight of actual guilt rests!

"I believe that I have as much, or more interest in this matter as any individual among ye all! My old father lies yonder, nigh unto death, shot down without mercy by—"

"The hand of the very demon you're trying to save from justice right now!" shrilled Lawyer Whitehead.

"I say no! If I really thought Dare Deverell was guilty of all this wrong-doing, I'd be among the first to demand his punishment! I'd be the earliest to fit a noose around his neck, and no man within sound of my voice this moment would give a stronger, heartier, more willing pull at the other end of that rope than my father's son!

"But—go at the job in sober, careful fashion, gentlemen! First make sure the right is with you, then—hang him if nothing less will fill the bill!"

"You bet we will, and right now, too!"

"Prove him guilty, first! I beg of you, gentlemen, don't let blind, unreasoning passion carry you too far or too fast! Don't take the risk of having innocent blood upon your hands, for—"

"Augh! shet off that chin chin! Will he never git through?"

There was another restless surge of the crowd, and Tracy Carroll was hustled away for a few paces, then wisely changing his tactics, he tried to slip out of the dangerous mass, returning to the idea which had struck him, while in yonder jail.

As he won clear of the crowd, Carroll met a man whom he failed to recognize, it appeared, for he spoke in hurried tones:

"Come! You'll help me, stranger!"

"Which?"

"Come, man! I'll explain as we go. To delay now may be fatal to my hopes of saving Deverell from lynching! Come, or—you're hindering instead of helping, man!"

Carroll could hardly have made a worse or more risky choice of an assistant, but such wild excitement excuses much, and this man bore small resemblance to the wild-eyed, disordered blacksmith who had so fiercely fought his way through crowd and guard to the presence of the prisoner himself.

Andrew Hammer had cleared that mob to return direct to his shanty, there to "red up" and don his "Sunday clothes," after which he strode back toward the jail to secure his longed for vengeance.

Possibly he gave Carroll credit for more than that young man deserved, but be that as it may, Hammer kept close to Tracy while he hurried off to put his conceit into execution, giving a hasty explanation while so doing.

"It's bound to come to a fight, sooner or later, and Deverell's only chance lies in breaking away! If he had a horse—I'll take his animal over yonder, and while I talk to the mob, you can—Will you, sir?"

"Try me an' see, boss!" grimly quoth the iron-worker, a peculiar glow in his bloodshot eyes the while.

Thanks to the prominence given everything at all connected with the sensational hold-up of the stage from Upper-crust, Carroll knew right where to look for the animal ridden by the road-agent in his hurried flight after shooting Pope Carroll, and even before his partly unnerved tongue could make fair or full explanation, he was leading that horse forth from its stall, saddled and bridled and ready for the road.

His strong face grimly set, Andrew Hammer kept close company with the "tender-foot" who was plotting to cheat the hangman, ready to play his part when the time seemed ripe; but after a far different fashion from that outlined by Tracy Carroll.

"While I hold the crowd—I believe I can by talking—you must run the horse as nigh the door of the jail as practicable. Then—well, it seems a mighty slim chance, but 'tis his only hope, after all!"

"Don't you worry over my doin' of it, sir," doggedly replied the blacksmith. "Jest you go on an' talk yourself plum' blind ef ye like!"

Judging from the sounds over by the jail, there was no time to be lost if any-

thing was to be done for the imperiled Sport, and this must help account for the unusual density displayed by the "new hand."

The two oddly matched mates hurried back to the vicinity of the jail, but then, just when Tracy Carroll was on the point of giving his final instructions as to the matter, he was shoved rudely away from the horse, while Andrew Hammer covered him with a cocked revolver!

"Stan' back, you!" harshly commanded the blacksmith, lifting his voice high enough to call all eyes in that direction for an explanation. "Keep off or I'll lift yer roof, stranger!"

"But—I don't—"

Instead of listening to that bewildered expostulation, Hammer moved on, speaking to the mob instead.

"Shet him off ef he tries to chip in, boys! He fetched this hoss to run off Dare Deverell fer—"

A fierce outburst drowned the end of that explanation, and even the sluggish-witted blacksmith was keen enough to realize that the hour was ripe for his desired vengeance.

A portion of the crowd swept in between the two men, shoving Tracy Carroll rudely back, impotent for further good, while Hammer lifted his voice high enough to command at least a brief hearing from that mob, now fairly famishing for a taste of human blood.

"Thar's bin plenty of chin-chin over this yer business," fiercely declared the blacksmith. "You all know how to pay off sech ugly scores 'thout my tellin' of ye, I reckon."

"What ye tryin' fer, then?" came a rude interruption. "Git a wiggle on, blame ye, Andy Hammer!"

"That's jest what I'm doin', gents. Dare Deverell rid free the time he held up the stage an' shot the old man! Now—hyar's the hoss he done that trick onto! He rid free, then; make him git up an' ride to glory this time on the same critter!"

There was something about this grim conceit which struck the mob favorably, and a score of lusty voices caught up the cry, men closing in around the snorting, startled animal as it was forced nearer the front of the jail.

Amos Timberlake tried to check the rising tide by warning his fellow-citizens against too hasty action, begging all to wait until the innocence or guilt of the prisoner might be fairly and fully made evident; but the force of this appeal was quickly broken by a fierce outburst from the blacksmith whose burning, stinging, aching back and shoulders kept urging him on to sweet revenge.

"Wait, be durned! Shell we stop gawpin' hyar, men, an' never do nothin' more'n chin-chin? Shell we stan' idly by an' let a dirty murderer go clean cl'ar?"

"Never! Mebbe the law-sharps could make it look like he never done anything fer to deserve punishment, but we know better! An' so I say—close in, men! Take what they're too big fools fer to give! An' ef they git hurt blockin' the way, so much the wuss fer 'emselves!"

CHAPTER XX.

HOW DEVERELL RAN THE GANTLET.

WITHIN the jail those two men stood listening to the growing tumult which each knew only too well must soon end in a rush for blood.

There was no room for doubting that much, but, to look at the pair, a stranger to the men might easily have mistaken prisoner for guard, and *vice versa*.

Although paler than usual, Dare Deverell showed a wonderful degree of nerve on this occasion, his sole anxiety seeming to be concerning the request for arms which, as yet, had been refused by Detective Jax.

"It's the not killing part of it I'm kicking against, bear in mind, pardner," the Dare-devil Sport said, tones smooth and even as though a frightful death was not staring him squarely in the face. "I reckon I could meet that as well as the majority of men, but I do hate to think that I'm fated to be choked off without one fair bite where all those howling wolves are making a square meal!"

"If they come in dead-earnest, guns wouldn't save you, Deverell."

"Perhaps not, but they'd make it a mighty sight more interesting!"

Detective Jax drew a long breath as he listened to those ugly sounds without, and presently he muttered:

"You look as though you thought Mr. Carroll was showing a bit of the white feather when he pulled out, Deverell?"

"Did I say so? He acted wisely, of course. Why stop in here to get salivated in the mix?"

"I know. And I'd act just as he did, if I was wise!" declared the detective, with a short, grim chuckle as he toyed with his revolvers. "But I always was a bit of a bulldog, and so—those howling wolves are not going to string you up alone!"

Dare Deverell made no answer to this grim speech, further than to grip hands for a moment; then the couple waited and listened.

Not for long. They could hear Andrew Hammer making his savage talk on the outside, then came sounds which could not be mistaken.

"Ready, old man!" cried Detective Jax, moving nearer the door. "The rush is coming and—I'll stand by you to the bitter end, remember!"

While speaking, he was removing the inner fastenings, and now flung the barrier wide, stepping over the threshold with guns out and covering that on-coming crowd, shouting forth a stern warning:

"Stand back, all! I'll never let a prisoner in my charge be lynched while I have life and—"

A crouching, skulking shape just then slipped around a corner of that building, clasp in hand a heavy stone which was hurled with great force and only too accurate an aim straight at the head of the dauntless detective.

Reuben Jax saw nothing of this peril, for his whole attention was taken up by the rush to be checked in front; and so stricken, he dropped in his tracks like one smitten by lightning!

"Now!" shrilly squealed Simon Whitehead, whose cowardly craft had brought this downfall about. "Now—close in on him, men!"

Dare Deverell stood close behind the detective, pale as a corpse but surely not through personal fear, else why that scornful smile?

Unfortunately he was not fairly clear of the doorway, and so failed to see that treacherous enemy in time to guard or to save; but when the shrill cry rung forth, he knew to whom he owed the loss of that ally.

The frightened horse was brought up with a rush, Andrew Hammer at its head, almost beside himself with savage joy as he felt his revenge could not be much longer delayed.

Dare-devil took it all in at a single glance, and as he saw that too-weak guard melt away as by magic, unwilling to slay or be killed in their turn, he knew that upon himself devolved the rest.

With a swift bend he caught up the revolver nearest him which had fallen from the unnerved grip of Detective Jax, and giving a loud shout of grim defiance, he sprang forward, striking swift and surely.

His first stroke opened a way to Andrew Hammer, and his second blow felled the blacksmith as swiftly as though smitten by his own sledge.

In falling, the reins were torn from that strong hand, and the frightened animal began plunging and kicking wildly, clearing a space immediately around its heels, far more surely than a volley of pistol-balls could have done.

Dare Deverell saw his chance, and instantly grasped it.

Knocking down a citizen who was aiming a similar blow at his head, the Dare-devil Sport leaped into the saddle and wheeled his good horse, yelling shrilly, half-beside himself with wild excitement.

Feeling a master upon its back, the horse plunged blindly forward, scattering the massed crowd to either side, then veering quickly to turn the nearest corner, its rider laughing recklessly as he bent low over the withers of his steed.

Intense confusion reigned for the moment, but then a shot or two were fired, and amid

howls and yells, cries and curses, the shrill notes of Simon Whitehead might have been distinguished, bidding all to shoot and kill!

The air was already full of spiteful explosions, and reckless, wild and aimless though the vast majority of those shots were, not all went astray, as could plainly be seen!

The horse, if not its rider, was wounded by more than one hastily aimed shot, and blood was sprinkling the dry ground as the fugitive sped away from jail, heading for the hills where the nearest cover might be found.

It seemed a miracle that either man or beast lived a single second after that furious fusillade began, for scores of shots were fired, and hardly a gun or pistol in all that mob but what was smoke-blackened long before the flying steed reached its first friendly shelter.

But neither man nor beast came to ground, killed or crippled, and hot chase was made, broken only when men checked their speed a bit to add another shot to the long roll.

Lying low over the withers of his horse, Dare Deverell urged the animal with heel, hand and voice, apparently thinking solely of escape by flight; for he never fired a shot, and only used his gun as a club to free himself from Andrew Hammer and the other lynchers who tried to bar his way from the jail.

Then, in spite of all their shots, the Dare-devil Sport passed out of sight among the rocks and scrubby trees which marked the broken ground; yet pursuit was maintained with vicious energy, all guided by the drops of blood which so plentifully marked that course of flight.

The chase did not last so very long, once the foot-hills were fairly entered, and the leading spirits in that chase sent an electrical thrill through their more sluggish or heavier-footed comrades by a wild yell of discovery, only a few minutes after sight was lost of the Dare-devil Sport.

Urged to renewed exertions by those shouts, the truth became known to one and all of the pursuers; and soon a crowd was gathered around that lifeless carcass.

Not of man, but of beast!

The good horse had raced until death came from its many serious wounds, but naught was to be seen of Dare Deverell, search as the crowd might. It really seemed as though the Sport had risen into the air, or been swallowed up by opening earth!

Long and persistently he was sought for by the crowd, secret friends as well as open enemies, but all in vain. No trail was found, and the manner of his escape remained a profound mystery even when the day was spent and the advancing shades of night put an end to further quest.

Long ere that hour came around, however, Tracy Carroll abandoned the hunt, returning to Paradise Park to visit his relatives and so relieve their natural suspense by giving them the actual facts, so far as he knew them, that is.

Pope Carroll was far too weak to endure such talk or excitement, and being still partially under the influence of the opiates which Dr. Hooper deemed it advisable to administer, he soon after ceased questioning his son, dropping off into a placid slumber, his mind evidently greatly relieved by the escape of Dare Deverell from the lynchers.

Now that he no longer felt the necessity of wearing a false front on his injured parent's account, Tracy Carroll permitted a part of his gloomy dejection to manifest itself in face and tones.

To Mr. Carroll he had never hinted at possible guilt on the part of Dare Deverell, but now—

"Of course I couldn't stand idly by and see the howling wolves tear him to bits and lap up his blood," he muttered, moodily, leaning far over in his seat and resting head on joined hands.

"Don't, Tracy!"

"If you had seen and heard—but let it go! I tried hard to believe Deverell innocent, but I fear—I fear—"

"Oh, Tracy!"

"I've got to say it, Noreen!" with almost savage emphasis as he lifted his head and gave it a vigorous shake. "I wouldn't even hint as much where father could hear me,

for he seems all bound up in the fellow on his—on poor mother's account!"

"I can't—I'll never believe Dare could do such a wicked deed!" bravely asserted Noreen, eyes glowing and cheeks regaining a portion of their wonted color, sadly faded since the hold-up of the Upper-crust stage and wanton shooting of her uncle. "Why should he harm poor uncle?"

Tracy made a passionate gesture at this, then added:

"If that was all! If that was the worst, even! But—it isn't, by long odds! The jailer—poor devil!"

"What do you mean, Tracy?" asked Noreen, tremulously.

And then her cousin told her all he had so far kept secret from both his father and herself; told her how Dare Deverell had been caught outside of his jail, and how Andrew Hammer had been flogged and Winston poisoned during the past night.

Noreen listened with ashen cheeks and horror-dilated eyes, but at the end of that gruesome recital, she still stood firm in her faith.

"He never did all that—never! With an angel mother such as he has, no man could go so terribly astray!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

WHEN Dare Deverell crossed his jail to face that mob of howling wolves in human shape, nothing was further from his mind than what so soon afterward transpired.

Those ugly sounds warned him that mob-law was uppermost, and that his death was almost certain; that Detective Jax and his few loyal men on guard before that prison door would not be able to long stem the tide; that were they to show actual fight the result would almost surely be their death or serious disability.

Still, he was determined not to perish without a struggle, and not to end his days on the gallows if fierce fighting could force those causeless enemies to kill him out of hand.

Then came the fall of Reuben Jax before the infernal cunning of the foxy lawyer, Simon Whitehead, after which the mad rush of the enemy with Andrew Hammer at their head.

The sight of his plunging, terrified horse gave the Dare devil Sport his first glimpse of freedom, and right promptly did he act upon that hint.

Once astride that good steed, Deverell gave partial vent to his long pent-up feelings by defiant shouts, yet even then, while shots were being fired and bullets were whistling on all sides of him, the cool and steady nerve of the Dare-devil Sport was manifest.

Where all hands were lifted against him, and every person within range seemed fairly athirst for his life-blood, only a man of wondrous nerve could have refrained from sending back shot for shot as far as lay in his power.

Instead, Dare Deverell contented himself with striving for liberty, gripping his revolver without firing a shot in return for the many, even when the frenzied bounds of his good steed but too plainly announced the fact of his being hit—and hit hard!

"Go it, boy!" the fugitive Sport muttered as he lay flat over those withers, heels playing a lively tune upon those panting, heaving flanks the while. "It's tough on you, pardner, but—git thar, Eli!"

Then, just as he was drawing fairly clear of the edge of the town, the Dauntless Sport felt his first smart; an iron of fire seeming to sweep over his left shoulder, telling him only too plainly that he had been hit by one bullet out of the many flying so recklessly around.

Even then the fugitive made no hostile use of the weapon he had caught up near the nerveless hand of his defender, Reuben Jax; and greater praise than this can hardly be given mortal man!

Deverell saw that nothing save headlong flight could save him for this daring break-away had fairly maddened yonder howling mob, and his shrift would be terribly short should he fall into their hands, now.

Still, thus far he had done no deliberate wrong. Up to now his record was perfectly clear, and such as no white man need blush to hear read aloud before mankind.

Should he strike back now, few could blame him, since it would simply be in self-defense; but Deverell hated to do that, and was determined not to while even the faintest show of escape by flight remained.

Wild, savage, blindly unreasoning though this mob assuredly was, for the most part they were honest as the term runs, acting for what they just now deemed was the best, holding it a duty to punish a murderer.

Thus it came about that Dare Deverell made no attempt to check the fierce pursuit, although there were times when a bullet could hardly have missed a victim if sent "into the black" where the citizens were so densely crowding in chase.

And so it was that, when fairly clear of town and entering the broken ground where the foot-hills fairly took the place of that comparative level, Deverell still gave thoughts solely to escape by flight, even while realizing that the minutes—if not moments—of his luckless mount were surely numbered.

Shot after shot had struck the horse, sinking deep toward its life seat, yet missing a bone the fracture of which would have brought that wild flight to an abrupt ending.

Deverell felt the poor beast quiver as though on the point of collapse, and felt the hot blood soaking through his trowsers as they sped along; but he used every art known to horsemen, keeping the animal up and going, true to the very last!

If he could only ride until these howling demons were fairly distanced! If the poor animal would last until they had thrown those human bloohounds off the scent!

That was entirely too much to hope for, and Deverell racked his busy brain to see what course afforded him the best chance of escape, or failing that, how he could make the hardest, longest fight for life.

When he saw the pursuers shut off from view by the broken ground, the Dare-devil Sport took his resolution, knowing that the end was perilously near for his now blindly racing steed.

Steadying himself for the leap, the Sport watched his chance, striking the horse sharply to urge him on without cessation even as he left the saddle to alight fairly upon a flat rock a bit to the left of that blood-sprinkled trail.

The horse raced on, to stop only when death claimed its prey!

With cat-like recovery, Deverell kept from falling, then sprung away for dear life, trying to leave no trail through stepping on soil where his footprints might give evidence against him, and succeeding far beyond his wildest hopes until he had won a hundred yards from the stone upon which he alighted after that flying leap.

Then some low bushes and vines barred his passage, and he sought to clear them by a flying leap, having no time in which to look before he leaped!

If he had, doubtless the ending would have been far different, but those human wolves were ravening along his trail, more thirsty for his blood than ever; and so—the leap!

Instead of striking solid ground beyond those vine clad bushes, Dare Deverell found himself falling—shooting down to—what?

An involuntary cry rose in his throat, but was smothered ere it could fairly find birth; another instance of that wonderful nerve.

Swift as thought itself the truth flashed upon the Sport, and he knew that leap had carried him fairly into the nature-masked mouth of an old mine-working, deserted long ago!

Even as that memory came, the fugitive felt a severe shock as he struck against some fairly solid substance; and more through instinct than pure reason, he grasped blindly at the matter which had cut short his wild plunge downward to certain death.

It proved to be one of the old timbers used to keep the earth from caving in, and which neither man nor time had removed.

The shock—for he struck upon his stomach—turned the fugitive sick and faint for the time being, and ere he could fairly rally, the lynchers seemed to be flocking around the spot.

Even so soon the mob had found the end of that bloody trail, and when satisfied that Deverell had not fallen in company with his

steed, scattered in mad quest, cursing and howling, shouting and threatening the while until the foot-hills seemed fairly alive with death.

Knowing that he could not hope to climb upward and flee from the mouth of the old shaft unseen by the enemy Dare Deverell kept as quiet as might be only stirring to better his situation in slight degree.

He could see, now, that the shaft widened out abruptly from its mouth down to where he now rested, making its shape something like the interior of a jug; and even so soon he realized the almost impossibility of making his escape without outside aid.

That old beam was partly covered by a wild grapevine, and this he used as a further protection, drawing a leafy spray or two over his person as he crouched there in a heap, contracted as much as possible.

Time and again Dare Deverell heard his pursuers trampling perilously near that shaft, and on one occasion he caught a glimpse of a human face as it peered curiously downward—the wrinkled, weazen face of Simon Whitehead, the foxy lawyer who had been most malignant of all those calling for his death by the hangman's hands!

But he escaped discovery through all, and those ominous sounds died away in the distance as the foiled lynchers sought further abroad.

Hour after hour passed thus, Deverell lying low, waiting and watching, at the same time trying to see how he might escape from this shaft when it should be prudent to make any decided move.

When so long a time had passed without sight or sound of his enemies, Deverell ventured to put his fears to the test, rising up from his covert and essaying to climb back to the mouth above.

Only to learn that his worst dread was well founded—to find that the air-rotted earth above that timber gave way at his touch, and that, lacking a stout knife or other implement with which to dig deep and secure holds for both foot and hand, the feat was fairly impossible.

While he was thus engaged, a small stone or two was dislodged with the smaller particles of earth, and as one of the heavier missiles fell into that gloomy depth, a sound came back which sent a wild thrill through the Dare-devil Sport in spite of his iron nerves.

A groan—surely that was a groan from human lips?

Breathless, quivering with powerful curiosity, Deverell stared into that darkness, listening for a repetition of the sound. For—surely he had not been deceived?

"It came from below, and was a groan or—I know it was!"

Had some one of his enemies fallen down the deserted shaft before him?

That could hardly be, since he had been in the lead. And yet—if not a human groan or moan, what was it?

So powerful was Deverell's interest and curiosity on this point that, after waiting in vain for a repetition, he bent as far as possible over that black hole, hands curved around lips to call out:

"Hello, there! Who's in the shaft?"

There was danger to himself in such a venture, as the Dare-devil Sport well knew; but he took the chances of being heard by enemies above ground rather than linger in doubt as to the real authorship of that enigmatical sound from the lower depths.

Again and again he called out, but no reply came back; and as time crept on without further sound from below, Deverell reluctantly concluded that fancy had fooled him for once.

Satisfied now that he could not win his way upward without almost certainly failing—and failure after the start was once fairly made would surely end in death through falling to the bottom of the shaft—the Sport changed his tactics and tried what could be done in the opposite direction.

There he was more successful, for the further he descended the less complete had been the ravages of time and the elements.

Here and there the timbers had bulged outward under the pressure of the loosening earth, but taken as a whole any man with a fair light to guide his movements would find no serious difficulty in completing that

descent: always barring that ugly break for more than a dozen feet below the mouth itself!

Slowly, cautiously, testing each point thoroughly before trusting his weight upon it, Dare Deverell worked his way downward, the gloom growing more dense with each yard of progress, yet the air remaining fairly pure, and entirely free from deleterious gases.

Then his feet struck bottom, although yonder mouth seemed awfully remote when he looked upward!

"At last!" Deverell muttered, drawing a long breath of relief, for the strain upon his nerves had been severe. "Now—what comes next?"

He released his grasp upon that last timber, and turned part way around, groping like a blind man.

His foot slipped in some moist substance, and he fell forward, giving a half-stifled cry as his right hand fell upon—a human face!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OF THE SHAFT.

In spite of his remarkable nerve, Dare Deverell shrunk from that contact as quickly as possible, drawing back with a low cry and a shiver which seems so natural when one is brought into the presence of violent death without the slightest warning.

For he never once doubted that this was death, and that through violence, a fall from yonder bush-masked mouth, almost certainly!

And yet—that groan!

Had it been real, or merely imaginary?

If real, why had not the owner of this cold, even clammy-feeling face cried out or groaned again at that rude contact?

Under circumstances like these a man's brain works with marvelous rapidity, and more questions occurred to the Sport than his tongue could have fully answered in many minutes.

"Who is it—I say!"

His voice sounded harsh and unnatural, muffled as it was by those contracted walls, and shaken further by natural agitation.

There came no answer, either by words or by groan; and after waiting a few moments longer, Deverell felt for and found a match.

He paused for a little, looking upward, wondering whether or no he might not be inviting discovery by his ruthless enemies; but then he struck the match along one leg, forming both hands into a partial cover as the light shot up brilliantly.

A moment to accustom his eyes to that bright glow, then Deverell leaned forward in the direction from whence he had so swiftly recoiled but a minute before, catching his breath sharply as the slender torch showed him the face and figure of a fellow-being.

He saw this—saw further that the figure belonged to a man, but he made no further discovery ere the match flickered and its light went out for good and all.

Nothing further, save that yonder face was fairly masked with blood, doubtless through severe hurts received by falling from yonder shaft-mouth.

Brief though that glimpse had been, it served to wholly banish what slight superstition the Dare-devil Sport had felt at first, and now he proceeded to make further investigations in the dark, rather than run the risk of self-betrayal through possible espial from above.

Closing hand upon the shoulder nearest him, Deverell gave it a gentle shake, hoping thus to rouse the stranger, should life not be entirely extinct, at the same time speaking distinctly, though lowly:

"I say, pardner!"

No answer, only that dull, leaden movement such as a not yet stiffened corpse gives when shaken.

Again and yet again the Sport repeated his shake and call, but as no sign rewarded his efforts, he was forced to conclude the poor fellow was indeed a corpse.

"Mighty little wonder, either, if he took a header from 'way up yonder!"

muttered the Dare-devil Sport, as he glanced toward the shaft-opening, seemingly so far above them. "Wonder how it happened, and who he really is?"

Using less caution, now that he believed death had rendered the unfortunate wholly insensible to pain, the Sport ran both hands over that invisible shape, trying by the sense of touch alone to ascertain just what manner of injuries had come to this poor fellow.

He found both legs broken by that fall, and while handling them to make all sure, Deverell was startled afresh by feeling the supposed dead man stir feebly and hearing him vent a faint, husky moan of pain.

That recoil was purely mechanical, and now that he knew life was still lingering in that frightfully crippled shape, Dare did all that lay in his power to aid and comfort the luckless being.

But that was so little!

He had no food, no drink, nothing to offer save barren sympathy!

Then, remembering the moist place from which his foot had slipped when he took his first blind step in that utter darkness, Deverell groped around for it—only to draw back and wipe his fingers swiftly as he recognized the touch of coagulated blood!

"His blood, too!"

Hardly knowing it, Deverell uttered those words aloud, and like a husky echo there came from the sufferer:

"Blood—all blood! Oh, devils! Why do you—Oh—h—h!"

His voice died away in an awful moan, testifying to agony past rather than present, however, for from what he had already learned as to the hurts received by this unknown, Deverell knew that his physical senses must be benumbed long ere this.

Still, he renewed his efforts to comfort the poor fellow, gently as possible shifting him to a more natural position, placing those shattered limbs so that the bones would not be apt to grate together at every movement made by that nearly helpless trunk.

And yet, there was so little he could do!

If he only had some water! If he but carried a pocket-flask of liquor, even!

Those moans and groans became more frequent now, and it seemed as though the unfortunate was growing feverish, even while his flesh remained cold and clammy to that gentle touch.

Convulsive shivers ran through his body, while his heavy head moved restlessly from side to side the while.

Now and then an articulate word or two fell from his lips, but by chance they were nothing through which Deverell could win even a clue to this poor devil's identity, until—

"Don't—I never—if Deverell finds out—"

The Dare-devil Sport gave a start and exclamation at sound of his own name coming through those lips, and while he was still far from divining the marvelous truth, that mention caused him to forget his fears of discovery from above, and he hastily felt for another match.

"He knows me for—Who are you, pardner?"

Only a faint moan made reply, and, lighting the match, Deverell bent closely over that face, brushing back the blood-matted hair, and giving a sharp cry of wondering excitement as he recognized the other fellow who had "spelled" Jack Winston as jailer at Paradise Park!

"Davis—it is—Bill Davis, I say!" cried the fugitive, sharply, as he gripped shoulder with his free hand, giving the crippled wretch a violent shake.

Those heavy lids lifted from the partly glazed eyes, but there was no show of recognition. Instead, the poor fellow tried to shrink away as if in mortal fear, huskily muttering:

"Don't—don't murder me! I never—Oh, Bass—"

His voice died away in a low gasp, and then the fellow lay like one surely dead in spite of the efforts made by the now

thoroughly excited Sport to force more from his faltering lips.

What had Davis meant to say? Of whose violence was he afraid? And what name had he attempted to utter just before his voice failed him?

"Bassett! Surely 'twas Knox Bassett! And—why? Or—did he take me for that fellow, wonder?"

Surely the Dare-devil Sport had plenty to puzzle his brain over during the long and trying minutes which followed, for now and then Bill Davis made moan or muttered a few words, some of which almost certainly seemed to implicate himself in that black night's work which had produced such disastrous results for Dare Deverell.

Then, slowly, surely, that death-fever grew worse, until naught save gasping breath and inarticulate moans passed those parched lips.

In spite of his growing belief that Davis must have had part and lot in his mysterious abduction of the past night, Deverell could not help feeling compassion for the poor devil now, his agonies seemed so frightful; and in hopes of finding some moisture, if not actual water, to lend relief to fevered brow and lips, he struck match after match and searched around those contracted quarters.

If he failed to find what he was looking for, the Sport made another discovery, which seemed even more important to himself: a dirty, blood-marked memorandum book, sent out by a patent-medicine concern, and between the leaves was a stumpy lead pencil and writing!

Thrilled to his very center, Dare Deverell held another match over this awkwardly scrawled record, very brief, yet containing so much.

In poorly spelled and worse written words he read what Bill Davis had painfully set down there in darkness, with a horrible death staring him full in the face, beginning with a brief appeal to whoever might find his body and confession, that they avenge his cruel murder!

"They done it—Sime Whitehead, an', I believe—Knox Bassett! Tuck off the Sport—whipped Andy Hammer—nocked me down here! I'm all stove up—dyin', I reckon—cuss 'em! They done it all! An' I hope—he'll ketch—"

A few more straggling marks which could not be interpreted, then nothing—save those awfully eloquent bloodstains.

Still, there was ample proof there to convince Dare Deverell that his first suspicions were founded on fact; that both his jailers had been concerned in that devilish scheme to still further blacken his reputation and bring about his death by lynch law! And—surer still—Knox Bassett had been in the lead of it all, playing his double!

Fairly wild to learn still more, Deverell tried his level best to recall the senses of the crippled jailer, but in vain.

The fever caused by those terrible injuries now had firm hold of the fellow, and would hardly let up while life endured.

If he only had some water! If he could only do more to cool that fever and fetch back those wandering wits!

He tried to waken a show of interest in the dying man by earnestly promising to avenge his death if Davis would speak more clearly; but while the jailer seemed to catch a faint inkling of his meaning, he appeared unable to speak further than an inarticulate muttering.

Then, just as he was resigning himself to the inevitable, Deverell caught sounds coming from above, and looking upward, saw something in motion at one edge of yonder shaft-mouth.

A moment later he recognized the head and shoulders of a human being outlined against the sky!

to his pursuers, who would be more than ever determined to end all by the rope.

Any death save that!

He shrunk back, for the instant forgetful of the fact that no human eye could hope to penetrate that dense gloom from above.

As he stared upward, one hand instinctively gripping butt of revolver, the Dare-devil Sport saw that his first belief was well founded; a man was leaning perilously far over the mouth of that old shaft, peering downward as though more than suspecting the secrets that queer refuge might contain.

And then the fever-racked jailer gave another hollow groan, moving restlessly the while, and fearing lest those sounds float upward to yonder curious ears and thus confirm dangerous suspicions, Deverell swiftly leaned forward once more, covering those parched lips with his palms.

Just in time to stifle a louder sound, and for a second or two he was kept busy with the blindly struggling cripple; too busy even for an upward glance, until—

Several bits of dirt came silently down the shaft, striking him smartly on head and bent shoulders, giving him a start and causing his eyes to look upward, to see—

With difficulty could the Sport choke back the cry of fierce horror which rose in his throat as he beheld yonder man clasping a heavy fragment of rock in both hands, in the very act of hurling the deadly missile down the shaft!

Deverell's first instinct was to draw back as far as possible in order to save himself from death by that ugly missile; but then he gave thought to the wholly helpless cripple, and grasping Davis with both hands, he exerted his great strength to the utmost, whirling the injured man out of the way, just as that rock came to the bottom with a heavy thud.

In falling, the rock fairly brushed one of his feet, almost forcing a cry of horror from his lips with the belief that he himself was now left a cripple; but luckily this was not so.

Bruised a bit, but nothing worse, and now, as he crowded close against the side of the shaft, still further protected by the timbers which projected a trifle, covering poor Davis with his own body, the Dare-devil Sport waited and watched through the uneasy minutes which followed.

Again and again did yonder brute in human shape fetch heavy rocks to hurl down the gloomy shaft, clearly determined to make sure work of it now; but through it all Deverell could only catch a passing glimpse of the fellow, not sufficient to identify him.

Was it one of his own pursuers, who had found signs enough above ground to make him suspect that this was the refuge sought by the fugitive on abandoning the dying horse?

If so, why not raise the alarm and start a regular investigation?

"Or—is it one of the rascals who gave Davis the grand dump?"

Lacking an alarm or an outcry, this appeared the more reasonable solution to the Sport, and hence his burning anxiety to win a fair sight of the fellow while busied with his nefarious work.

At length, after seeing and hearing a full half score boulders and chunks of rock come whirling down the shaft, Dare Deverell was in part gratified, for he who had taken such savage means to set evil doubts at rest forever, now leaned as far over that opening as he could without actually endangering his own life by a tumble.

Deverell choked back a savage growl as he recognized the man: none other than the foxy lawyer, Simon Whitehead.

As by instinct his revolver came forth and covered that head, so distinctly outlined against the clear sky.

Thumb lifted hammer, and the merest crooking of finger on trigger would have proved sufficient to avenge both—but, would it?

To slay yonder foul assassin was easy

enough, now, but would that help clear away the ugly suspicions which he had almost certainly done so much to fasten about the Dare-devil Sport?

Only for that restraining thought, it is almost certain another missile of far different sort would have come plunging swiftly down that old shaft!

Then Davis gave other moans of fevered pain, and dropping his gun for the time being, Deverell used both hands to smother those dangerous sounds until long after yonder torso had vanished from view.

Simon Whitehead apparently felt convinced he had surely completed the ugly work begun by that treacherous blow and consequent fall down the deserted shaft, for he did not show himself at the mouth again, although the Sport kept on guard for the better part of an hour before feeling assured of that retreat.

He knew then that 'twas not on his account that the weazened little lawyer had taken so much trouble, else Whitehead would have called other men to his assistance, and this significant omission went far toward convincing the Sport that those charges made by cripple Davis must at least be founded on fact.

"I'll call you to full account, Simon, when I get you out of this!" was Deverell's unspoken oath while crouching there beside the dying jailer.

For he could no longer doubt that dread fact—poor Bill Davis was rapidly sinking, kept alive thus long only by his great vitality.

There was nothing Deverell could do for the poor fellow, and those minutes seemed hours in length as he waited in the dark; waited for the last faint flicker of that expiring lamp!

It came, presently.

A husky moan, a convulsive shiver, a vain effort to spring erect upon those crushed and mangled limbs; then silence!

With a gentle hand the Dare-devil Sport felt for heart-beat, but in vain. He leaned close over that unscen face, but not the faintest suspicion of breath fanned his sensitive cheek.

Striking a match, Deverell looked his last upon that sadly bruised and pain-drawn face; but long ere the tiny torch burnt itself out, his last doubts were settled.

William Davis had gone to meet his last account!

Not until then did Dare Deverell really give thought to his own situation, precarious as he knew it to be; but now, with only himself to think of or care for, the Sport fell to work.

His first move was to remove the belt of arms which Davis had worn through all, and his grim pleasure may more easily be surmised than told when he found that no serious injury had come to either of the heavy Colts or the broad-bladed butcher-knife in leathern scabbard.

The belt likewise contained a fair supply of cartridges for the revolvers, and when the belt was fairly buckled in place around his own waist, this fugitive from injustice felt once more the Dreadnaught Sport.

Deverell's brain had been busy enough throughout all that weary waiting for death's coming, and he had long since recalled all he had ever heard concerning this abandoned working.

He knew how it had been opened with seemingly fair prospects, only to be abandoned in the end as a complete "fizzle."

He knew that, in addition to the shaft itself, the owners had drifted into the hillside, making connection between the two; but he knew, too, that at least a portion of the timbers used to protect the workers in that tunnel from caving earth had long since been taken away.

Had that robbing resulted in closing the tunnel past exit from the shaft?

This was the dread which haunted him now, and to settle those ugly doubts, Deverell made use of several of his dwindling store of matches.

He found the tunnel open sufficiently to permit his passage from the shaft proper,

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNDER THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

Deverell's first thought was that the manner of his escape had become known

and then postponed further explorations until he could lift and carry the body of Bill Davis a little way into this opening.

"Partly for what's left of the poor fellow, in case that Whitehead comes back to tumble more rocks down the shaft!" reflected the Sport, while thus engaged. "And, too, it may be for myself in the end."

Although he would not give full utterance to that ugly possibility, Deverell knew that there was such a thing as death for himself in that trap, since no mortal man could hope to climb that shaft unaided from above, while the tunnel might easily be rendered impassable through extensive caves.

But, sooner or later, this place would be explored, if merely through vague curiosity; and then this poor relic of frail mortality might tell tales loud enough and clear enough to bring retribution upon the foul schemers!

To make still more sure of that, Deverell forced those clinched and death-stiffening fingers open far enough to insert that notebook and pencil, then held the hand shut until it closely retained the grim evidence of a triple crime.

"Now! Even if I kick the bucket while trying to get out of this trap, the truth will come to light in God's own good time!"

For, on a leaf adjoining the last page scrawled over by Bill Davis, Deverell had written a few words to which his name was signed.

Having thus made what preparations he deemed advisable, the Dare-devil Sport turned away from the dead man, groping along that damp-feeling tunnel, trying to believe that it would finally lead him to the outer world again.

His hopes gradually rose as he covered more ground, finding the passage practicable, even though it showed signs of caving in at several points by the way; but then, when he felt that he surely must have covered at least one half the distance from shaft to adit, Deverell stopped short with a half-smothered cry of fierce disappointment.

The tunnel was no longer open ahead, but had been closed by a cave-in, for his hand and head struck against seemingly solid earth!

This bitter disappointment, coming as it did, just when his hopes were soaring highest, turned the adventurer sick and faint, and for a few minutes he crouched there where that mechanical recoil had sent him, unable to act or even to think.

Then he began to rally, for he reflected that, after all, this might prove to be but a temporary check; the fall of earth might be comparatively trifling, while he was strong and fairly well armed, thanks to the knife once worn by Bill Davis.

"Bracing up" after this fashion, Deverell lit another of his few remaining matches, and by its brief glow made a hurried inspection of what barred his way.

He had no means of determining just how extensive that cave might prove, but one thing was past doubt—it completely filled up that portion of the tunnel, and if he was to reach the outer world in that direction he certainly would have to carve a passage through.

Resolved to make the attempt, whether or no success was to reward his efforts, Deverell fell briskly to work there in utter darkness, using his knife to loosen the packed earth, then flinging back dirt and stones with his strong hands.

It was hard work, and none the less so because of the horrible uncertainty! He might spend the rest of his shortened life trying to eat a way through this ugly barricade!

In spite of all such fears, the Dare-devil Sport stuck to his work with dogged energy, plying knife and hands as though he knew but a foot or two of soft earth now barred his way to liberty. And then—with a glad, gasping cry he felt that knife-armed hand pass through the dirt, surely finding an opening just beyond.

Five minutes later Deverell was through the hole, and hurrying on through the

darkness, now aglow with glad hope once more. But, heavens!

A heavy jar sounded from the rear, and as bits of dirt struck him, Dare rushed blindly ahead, only to come in violent contact with another unyielding wall, thus proving himself completely blocked in—buried alive! Both flight and retreat forever cut off by solid earth!

CHAPTE XXIV.

PLAYING FOR HIS DOUBLE.

On the day following that which marked the escape of Dare Deverell from both jail and lynchers at Paradise Park, the Upper-crust stage was bowling briskly along an easy portion of the trail lying between those two lively towns.

On the box-seat beside the driver sat a man who, in both face and figure, bore an almost startling resemblance to the Dare-devil Sport, although Knox Bassett was hardly apt to congratulate himself on that remarkable likeness after what had happened of late.

As it chanced, the gambler and driver were talking about the Sport and his evil doings, for a courier had been sent over the range to notify the sister-town of the wonderful escape, and bid all honest men keep an eye out for that notorious criminal, Dare Deverell.

"To tell the truth, pardner, I never did bank very heavily on the Sport," Bassett was saying, in confidence. "When a fellow is so mighty upright that he bends backward—look out for him!"

"That's what!" quoth the man of the ribbons.

"Still, this outdevils the devil! How could he foolish poor Jack Winston so completely? And—where did he get the stuff to dope him with? That's what's eating me, pardner!"

"Me, too!" quoth the driver.

Silence reigned for a time, both men seemingly brooding over that as yet unexplained fact. Winston had surely come to his death by a dose of strychnine, but how administered? And why, since the poor fellow must surely have been bound before death?

That enigma was fated to remain unsolved for the present, so far as the occupants of that box-seat was concerned, for just then a masked man sprang forth from ambush alongside the trail, guns in hand, and dexterously catching the drop as the stern challenge came:

"Hands up! Try to pull a gun, and you're a gone goose, Bassett!"

Sternly, fiercely came those words, for the gambler instinctively reached for a pistol as he shrunk quickly back to foil that aim; but he was far from being a fool, and when he saw how surely he was lined, up flew his empty hands and out came the words:

"Don't shoot! Hands up it is, pardner!"

"Keep 'em so, then! Steady, all inside the hearse! This is solid old business, and I'm shooting before taking any long chances!"

Sundry cries, oaths, and exclamations came from the passengers, but not a shot was fired and that surprise seemed complete.

In order to make it so, the road-agent quickly added:

"Play white, and I'll treat you the same way, gentlemen all! Kick, and I'll make it your latest effort in that line! Now—business!"

Standing so that he could with perfect ease command the stage and every one of its occupants, the masked road-agent spoke on:

"Climb down off your box, driver—on this side, please!"

"Good Lawd, boss! Shorely I hain't done nothin' fer to—"

"Now, but you're going to, pardner! Will you climb down, or shall I help you with a blue whistler?"

"Don't shoot, boss! I'm comin' like—mind the team, Bassett!"

"Steady, Knox!" sternly warned the road-agent, as the gambler seemed about to comply with that agitated request by taking the ribbons. "Lower your hands

before I grant permission, and salt can't save you!"

"All right. If it's a runaway—"

"I'll drop a wheeler to play rough-lock, so don't you worry, Sport," coldly retorted the mask, one gun keeping pace with the descending jehu, while its mate kept the gambler closely covered through all.

"On deck, boss!" reported the driver, teeth chattering as he spoke.

"Good enough! Stand at ease until I bid you do more. Now, Mr. Bassett, you will oblige me very much by following suit. Come down, brother!"

"Just as you say, not as I'm caring," lightly spoke the man of cards, descending over that high wheel. "But it's mighty high a water-haul you're making, pardner, so far as I'm concerned. Hit a nasty running deck over at Upper-crust, and—"

"Less chin-chin, please," curtly cut in the man in mask, following the gambler's every movement with unerring aim. "Now—catch, driver!" he added, tossing some stout thongs that way.

"What fer, boss?"

"Knox Bassett, I want you! I'm going to take you, living if I can, dead if I must! Now—shall I cripple you with a shot, or will you follow orders and so spare us both worse trouble?"

"What to do, first?" uneasily asked the gambler.

"Swing your hands out on each side, then bring them behind your back without coming near your guns. Try to draw, and I'll salivate you!"

"And afterwards?"

"The driver will tie your wrists and your elbows; nothing worse than that. Now—follow orders, or crack goes your right elbow-joint!"

If ever warning was wholly meant, this surely was, and so realizing, Knox Bassett in grim silence followed instructions, crossing his hands when once brought behind his back.

"Tie him, and do your work on penalty of getting a sickener yourself, driver," came the next command, and while this order was being carried out, the audacious road-agent had a word or two to spare for the inside passengers.

"Keep your heads in out of the wet, gentlemen, all! Don't let any of your private fireworks explode, for I'm that awfully nervous—well, if anything like that should happen, I'm sorely afraid I'd fill that shell so full of holes 'twould be a hearse in fact as well as in name!"

Feeling that by so doing he might be paying his own ransom, the driver quickly and securely applied those thongs as directed, at the end leaving Bassett wholly helpless and at the mercy of his captor.

"Good enough!" decided the road-agent, after looking over the bonds and seeing that each knot was well-drawn, then moving closer to the hampered gambler until he could reach across those broad, shapely shoulders to cover the stage with his guns.

"Now, driver, climb back to your perch. And you, gentlemen, give your thanks to whomever thanks may be due, for your passage-money is fairly paid by our mutual friend, Knox Bassett, Esquire."

"Shell I—kin I go ahead, boss?" hesitatingly asked the driver, as he gained his seat and picked up the ribbons once more.

This seemed incredibly good luck, yet what else could those words mean but permission to pass on, toll-free?

And so it proved to be, for the road-agent added, briskly:

"I've got just what I came after, gentlemen, all! Now, a word in parting, and please don't make me repent my magnanimity!"

"You are at perfect liberty to go ahead, but—don't turn or come back until you've fairly touched Paradise Park, or I'll send some of your number to—well, not to be impolite, suppose we say up-stairs paradise!"

"What are you thinking to do with me, curse you?" demanded the gambler, be-

ginning to fear that he had made a sad mistake in yielding so tamely.

"Not eat you without skinning and cooking, rest assured, pardner," came the cool retort. "Now—jog along, josey! Straight for Paradise, driver, and if you pull rein before hitting town, I'll kill you by inches at our next interview! Now—git!"

Only too willingly the man obeyed, while the bold road-agent stood behind his captive, an arm over each one of Bassett's shoulders, keeping guns trained upon the stage until it rolled rapidly beyond range.

"Now, quick-step!" the robber commanded, putting up a pistol to employ that hand otherwise. "March! And don't try to kick up a row where you alone must suffer, Bassett!"

The gambler was forced away from the stage road among the rocks and scrubby vegetation, unable to resist, thanks to those close bonds.

For some little time he maintained a sullen silence, but then his fierce curiosity got the upper hand, and he exclaimed:

"Who the old boy are you, anyway?"

"Well, suppose you call me—your double, Bassett?"

"What! Are you—by—! It's Dare Deverell!"

The gambler fairly exploded as he reached this startling conclusion, but before he could take more decisive action, he was grasped by the man in mask and securely hoodwinked, thus robbed of even his eyesight.

"Now, pardner, don't you worry your poor brain over what or whom I may happen to be," coolly quoth his captor, once more forcing the gambler along through those hills. "It's enough for the time being that I'm master of your person and master of your life as well. So—keep in motion until I tell you you may stop, please."

That real or mistaken belief seemed to cow the gambler, for he made no attempt to break away, yielding to a touch and hurrying along in utter darkness at the sweet will of his captor.

That journey lasted some little time, but at length it neared an ending, for the man in mask paused briefly at what seemed to be the vine-masked mouth of an old tunnel, briefly saying:

"We're mighty nigh home, pardner, but there's still a bit of rather difficult traveling for us both. Do as I say, and move as I shove you, if you hope to come out safely in the end!"

Without further preparation than he might gather from these words, Knox Bassett was conducted into that tunnel for the most part amply wide and high enough for the two men to move erect, but at several points so contracted that they were obliged to creep along on hands and knees.

This was sufficient to give Bassett a fair idea of the real facts, and he was not long in deciding that they were passing along an old, deserted drift, where the roof and sides had caved in in places.

At one or two points his keen sense of touch told him dirt had been recently moved, but he made no remarks, and only drew a long breath of partial relief when that guiding hand checked his further progress.

"How much further of this sort of traveling, pardner?" he asked, in fairly steady tones, showing no mean degree of nerve, all things considered.

"No further, Knox Bassett," answered his guide and captor, lighting an old lamp, then swiftly pulling off that hoodwink, as he sternly cried:

"Behold, Knox Bassett! Gaze upon another of your victims, assassin!"

The gambler was standing face to face with the corpse of Bill Davis, now propped up against the side of that drift.

cied might be in store, Knox Bassett recoiled with a low, half-superstitious cry.

Little wonder!

That tableau had been prepared with no small degree of skill and almost diabolical art, the dead man being placed upon a slight elevation in such manner that its face was nearly level with that of the gambler, and apparently standing without other support.

That pain-distorted face was still streaked with blood, and as that oil lamp flickered in the draught now passing through the shaft and tunnel, its dim light made shades and shadows across that face until it called for no strong imagination to fancy the corpse grinning and mocking its beholder.

"Confess, Knox Bassett!" sounded a deep, hollow voice, just then. "You foully assassinated me, and—"

But that was going just a little too far, and the gambler rallied, sternly crying out:

"You lie, Dare Deverell! I never harmed this man, and you know it!"

While speaking, he turned part way around to more nearly face his captor, and while he himself looked very pale, showing a degree of agitation, all that was nothing more than any honest man might well have been excused for betraying under similar circumstances.

The man in mask gazed fixedly into his face through the eyelets in that black mask, but instead of flinching further, Bassett added:

"Show your face if you're not all coward, Dare Deverell!"

"Not at your bidding, but of my own free will," coldly said the one who had that day played road agent, lifting hand to remove the cloth covering, when the dim light of the smoky lamp showed the strongly handsome features of the Dare-Devil Sport.

"I knew 'twas you!" exclaimed the gambler.

"I meant that you should know just that, Mr. Bassett."

"Road-agent, too!"

"Did you think you held a monopoly?"

"I never—you know I never played a hand like that, curse you!"

"If you never played a worse one than I have played this day, pinfeathers will be pricking through the skin of your shoulders, Bassett! But—that isn't solid business, after all!"

"What have you fetched me here for, Deverell?"

With a swift grip and resistless motion that strong hand once more forced the gambler to face yonder grewsome object, Deverell sternly speaking:

"Can you ask me that, Knox Bassett, with this poor devil facing you? You used him as a tool until he had served your evil ends; then you sent him down to meet a horrible death—like this?"

"I never—you lie like a whelp, if you dare say I did!" fiercely cried the gambler, trying to face his accuser more squarely. "What proof have you that I ever—are you crazy, man?"

That pitiless grip tightened, holding Bassett wholly helpless. So long as his arms were in bonds, just so long he stood not the ghost of a chance against this man of muscle.

Giving him time enough to fully realize his present impotence, Dare Deverell then changed his tactics, swinging the captive around until he lost sight of that accusing corpse.

Forcing the gambler to take a sitting position nearer the shaft bottom itself, the Sport turned out the light, leaving everything in that vicinity shrouded in complete darkness.

"They say deeds of evil best love darkness, and as a doer of such, Bassett, you ought to prefer the same!"

"You've got me foul, Deverell, and can insult me with impunity," the gambler said, coldly, no longer betraying fear, superstition, or hot rage. "Set my hands free—give me the use of even one of them—and I'll cram each dirty lie

down your throat as fast as you can spit them out!"

A bold defiance, surely, and scarcely such as a guilty man would make; but Deverell was so firmly convinced of that guilt he could not give place to anything like doubt.

A short, metallic laugh came through the darkness from his direction at this, then followed the words:

"You've had your turn long enough, Knox Bassett. Now it comes my way, and it's for you to take what's given! So—steady, all!"

"Even granting as true your plea of utter innocence, Bassett, you're right well aware of the nasty work that's been doing of late. And you know, too, that it's all being laid to my door—why?"

"Because you've done the dirty work, of course!"

"Wait, will you? Because the dirty work has been done by—not Dare Deverell, but some cunning devil who has stolen my looks as well as my reputation!"

A low, sneering laugh came from the gambler's lips, speaking far more plainly than mere words could have done.

A brief silence, then the Dare-Devil Sport sternly added:

"Don't try to rub it in too deeply, Knox Bassett. I've brought you here to hear the bald-headed truth, and sneers or scoffs can't save you. Will you listen, or shall I gag you as well?"

That was a bitter pill to swallow, but Bassett was far from being a fool, and, knowing how wholly he lay at the mercy of this man, he decided not to make a bad matter worse.

"Go on," he said, with forced indifference. "Reckon I can stand it for a while."

Another brief silence ensued, as though the accuser was preparing the arraignment in his mind. Then Deverell spoke in low but clear tones:

"I know that I never took a hand in this evil work; yet all who were in the queer mix-up unite in swearing that 'twas me, or my double!"

"Of all the men I can think of, you alone bear a close resemblance to me, in face, voice, build, and general get-up!"

"That's my misfortune, not my fault," coolly retorted the gambler.

"Of course, you'll deny everything; but 'twill take more and better evidence than your unsupported word to clear away the proofs I now hold against you, Knox Bassett!"

"How long have you been manufacturing them, pray?"

"Wait. This isn't a matter for jesting, as you're wise enough to realize," came the sober reproof. "Listen to my accusation, then you can offer your defense. Will you do this, Knox Bassett?"

"You'll give me a show, then?"

"That's why I've brought you here. If I merely sought for revenge without caring to fully confirm my suspicions, what was to hinder my shooting you down at the stage?"

The gambler drew a long breath, plainly audible in those contracted quarters, then gravely spoke in turn:

"All right, Mr. Deverell. Go on. I'll take my turn later."

"That sounds like the pure quill, but saying and proving are two entirely different things," grimly commented the Dare-devil Sport, whose recent experience made him something of a skeptic when it came to putting blind faith in human nature.

Bassett kept silence, and presently the Sport spoke on:

"It's hardly necessary to tell just how that dirty trick was turned, when Pope Carroll got his hurt, Mr. Bassett. Even granting that you had no better means of information, you have learned pretty much all from those who were in the hold-up."

"My horse, my hat, coat, and guns took part in that affair, but the fellow who employed them was not my mother's son—I can swear that, by all mankind holds sacred!"

CHAPTER XXV.

ACCUSED BY A CORPSE.

In spite of his strong nerves, which he had schooled to meet what he fan-

"I was tricked, just as any other man might have been trapped. I even now carry the marks on my scalp where I was knocked silly from behind by the cunning devil who set the trap for me!"

"While the stage was being held up—as I now firmly believe, wholly and solely with the purpose of casting dangerous suspicion upon me—I was lying bound and blinded there off the trail, unable to help myself, much less harm other people!"

"I had to fight for my freedom, and when at last I won clear of my bonds, I hurried the quickest I knew to Paradise Park, with no worse purpose than to clear my record in all eyes."

"Now, those who saw the face worn by that road-agent, declare their firm belief that he was myself! That means he must have borne a strong resemblance to me, in figure as well as in face."

"You answer that description, Knox Bassett, and I doubt if there is another man in all this region who could—if he would—successfully play my double!"

"And I never did try to play it!"

"So you say, of course!"

"So I can prove, even as I did prove my innocence when that detective came snooping 'round my heels," coldly reiterated the gambler. "All the time the Upper-crust stage was being held up, I was right there in Paradise, playing poker."

"I know that was what you said."

"And that was what I proved—what I can prove to-day, by three different witnesses."

"By three knaves, whose sworn oath wouldn't justify the hanging of a sheep-killing cur!" contemptuously cried the Dreadnaught Sport. "But let that point pass for the present."

"That alibi satisfied others, even though you affect to scoff at it," coldly retorted the accused.

"Wait. I am not through yet," more equably spoke the Dauntless Sport from out the gloom which enveloped them both.

"That night I was taken from jail, by fellows who jumped on my back and blindfolded me, then tied my arms tightly behind my back."

"They hustled me outside, then put me on a burro, and led me out of town, heading north at first, then veering a little more toward the east, as I discovered later on."

"When well into the hills—I could point out the identical spot to you if I thought that would be anything new!"

"Facts, not dirty hints, if you please!"

"I'll give you facts enough, and to spare, never fear, Mr. Bassett! Just open your ears and listen, please!"

Thereupon the Dare-devil Sport tersely but clearly narrated his experience of the night in question, marked by so many queer happenings.

He grew still more emphatic when telling how his double removed mask and stood before him in that light—uncertain, yet sufficiently clear for him to fully identify—

"Yourself, Knox Bassett!"

"I deny it all, from start to finish!" sternly cried the man accused. "How could that have been me, when I—bah! If not drunk or crazy, Dare Deverell, then you are lying like a demon!"

"I can and will make solemn oath that you, and you only—"

"If you swear that, sir, you are perjuring yourself from top to bottom!" harshly interrupted the gambler, now strongly agitated. "I was at Upper-crust, and so could not possibly have been here, or even near here!"

"So you say, but—"

"And so I can prove past all doubting."

A sharp, sneering laugh cut him short, and there came a snapping sound as a match was ignited.

Deverell lit the oil lamp, and when the smoky chimney had been replaced, he crossed over to where that ghastly corpse was secured, taking something from one of those death-stiffened hands, turning upon the gambler to sternly add:

"You talk about proof, Knox Bassett! Right here is proof that you are liar as well as assassin! Right here you are accused both by living and the dead—by myself and by Bill Davis, yonder!"

One hand held the memorandum book; its mate pointed to that corpse.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLEADING ANOTHER ALIBI.

Knox Bassett flinched perceptibly, but 'twas a shrinking from the dead, not the living; a touch of native superstition, not of physical cowardice.

A grim and ghastly accuser, truly!

That irregular draught caused the old and worn burner to flicker and change the measure of light, thus making it seem as though yonder blood-marked face was now grinning, now scowling, the deception heightened by those partly opened eyes.

The Dare-devil Sport curled lip at that visible recoil, and, seeing this, the gambler rallied by a desperate effort, forcing his voice to hold steady as he spoke:

"I repeat what I said, Mr. Deverell, in your teeth and in the face of yonder corpse—I am wholly innocent of any wrong-doing, so far as playing your double goes."

"Stop!" came the coldly fierce command. "Knox Bassett, you have played me dirt! You have blackened my name and fame past all redemption; for, no matter how clearly I may be able to prove my complete innocence of wrong-doing in the end, there will always be some doubters to mentally if not audibly brand me a fraud!"

"Now, I am going to play even or lose my life in the attempt! I'm going to bring the whole truth to light, no matter what time or trouble it takes, or what it may cost!"

"If the guilty being should prove to be not you, then I'll humbly beg your pardon, and submit to any sort of satisfaction you may see fit to demand by way of reparation."

"I'll remind you of just that, sir, one of these days!"

"If you are not fully proven guilty, Mr. Bassett, no reminder will be needed," coldly retorted the Dreadnaught Sport, still holding that notebook closed in his hand.

"On the other hand, if I prove you guilty, as I now firmly expect to do, I'll make you confess to each and every dirty trick in public, then hang you higher than Haman!"

With cold ferocity came this threat, and, strong-nerved though he undeniably was, Knox Bassett shrank perceptibly, and turned a shade paler than before.

Still he put on a bold front, slowly repeating:

"I tell you I have had nothing at all to do with all this mix-up. I can prove an alibi so good that even you can't begin to doubt it!"

"A body'd almost think you held a corner on alibis," grimly mocked the doubting Sport at this. "But against that alibi I have this!"

With a swift motion Deverell opened that notebook at the statement written down in darkness and agony by poor Bill Davis, holding it so the lamplight fell fairly athwart the scrawled and blood-smeared page, as he spoke on:

"This was written by a man conscious of coming death, and even you can hardly doubt his perfect sincerity under such circumstances. Now—what sort of alibi can you offer against an accusation like this, I demand, Knox Bassett?"

Slowly, carefully the gambler puzzled out those uneven characters, only speaking when he read to the bottom of the first page, then saying:

"Turn over, will you?"

When he came to the final scrawl, out of which no man living could bring aught intelligible, he lifted eyes to that stern and accusing face, firmly speaking:

"Is this all the proof you have to offer, sir?"

"Isn't it sufficient?"

"Well, hardly! Giving it all the weight it can possibly claim, what does it amount to?"

"It's the dying words of a murdered man, remember!"

"But, so far as I am concerned, there is no actual charge. At best, 'tis but a vague belief, and dying men—"

"Careful, sir!"

"I need to be careful with such as you for my accuser, judge, jury, if not executioner as well!" bitterly spoke the prisoner, eyes glowing vividly in the dim lamplight.

"Do you dare deny that you played the part set down in this book?" sternly demanded the Dare-devil Sport, finger tapping that notebook to more plainly point his full meaning.

"I more than deny it, Sir. I can prove past all room for doubting that I never took part or lot in the nasty work of that night," coldly yet defiantly answered the bound gambler.

"Bare denial lacks a mighty sight of being solid proof, remember, Knox Bassett."

"I'm not asking you to take my bare word for what I claim, Mr. Deverell. When I say prove, I mean just that—nothing less, nothing more."

"Go on, please," with forced calmness. "This alibi of yours?"

"Wait a bit. Now—can even so devilish a fellow as you seem to think I can be in two widely separated places at one and the same time?"

"Of course not."

"Good enough! You say I was at Paradise Park. That I helped run you off from the jail into the hills, where I showed you my face. You say that to my hands Andrew Hammer owed his flogging, and Jack Winston his death by strychnine poison."

"Is this about what you charge, Mr. Deverell?"

"Yes, with the addition that you and Simon Whitehead murdered this man, after he had served your foul ends," coldly amended the Sport.

"I deny each and every specification, Sir, and pronounce the whole charge a crazy mistake—unless you are trying to make me bear the burden of your own devilish crimes!"

A bold assertion, truly! But Dare Deverell was waiting to get at the bottom facts of this queer mix-up, and so kept his passions in check.

"Go on, please. This alibi of yours?"

"Is just this: I was in Upper-crust all the time these events were taking place."

"So you say!"

"And, fortunately, so I am able to prove past even your doubting, Mr. Deverell," coolly retorted the gambler, now seemingly the more composed of the pair.

"After what fashion?"

"You are acquainted with Ellis Morganstern, I believe?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"Do you consider him a responsible man, first?"

"Yes."

"Good enough! I slept in the same bed with him last night at Upper-crust, and right there you have the essence of my sneered-at alibi!"

"Are you in sober earnest, Mr. Bassett?" demanded the Sport, tones altering in spite of himself as he put the question.

"Put me to the test and see how I'll assay," quickly demanded the bound man. "Take me to Morganstern, and—"

A mocking laugh cut short his eager speech, and then Deverell said, sneeringly:

"On the chance of your making a break-away to cheat the noose I've promised you? Thanks, awfully, for thinking me such a simple ass!"

"On my honor—"

"That of a fellow charged with half the crimes in the catalogue? You make me weary, Bassett! But—if I can't take

you, maybe I can find the witness to prove your alibi on my own hook."

As the Dare-devil Sport said this, he made a motion as though to leave the tunnel, when Bassett's nerve seemed to give way all at once, and in agitated tones he cried out:

"Don't—don't leave me here alone with—with that—him!"

A motion of his head indicated that ghastly seeming corpse, and the gambler's face turned ashen under superstitious horror at the bare idea of such grewsome companionship.

Deverell glanced from dead to living, holding silence for a half minute, during which Bassett begged humbly to be taken outside, even if no further away.

"It'd turn my head white just to stay here with that grinning—ugh! For love of heaven, pardner—"

"If I put out the light you can't see or be seen, Bassett."

"Don't—that would be worse than the other!"

That iron nerve seemed entirely broken, now, and even an enemy might have seen something to pity in that pale face and shaken body, had that enemy suffered less bitter wrongs than he who now held the power in his own hands.

"It's all in the score, Knox Bassett," he said, harshly, as he shoved the gambler further along, and turned his back to a slanting timber well fitted for his present purpose. "I've taken my last long chance, and now I'm playing to my own hand!"

"Curse you, and curse all others! I'm working for Dare Deverell, now, and if you suffer a weenty bit worse—well, so have I suffered!"

With a length of rope which had apparently been provided for just that purpose, the Dare-devil Sport bound the gambler firmly to that timber, testing each knot when through, like one determined to leave nothing whatever to chance.

"I've got to leave you here, Bassett, and if you don't exactly savor your nearest company, blame circumstances, not me alone!"

"I'll kill you for this if ever I win clear, curse you, Deverell!" huskily vowed the man of cards as he saw the Sport moving toward yonder dimly burning lamp, as though meaning to extinguish the light.

"That's all right, too, pardner, if you can make it come that way," was the equable retort. "I'm going to look a bit deeper into this real or fancied alibi of yours, and—careful, there!" with sudden sharpness as he heard the gambler begin to fight against his bonds.

"Set me loose, then! Or—don't put out the light! That corpse will—stop, I say!"

"I really haven't time to tarry longer, pardner, but—if you really grow weary of life under such circumstances, just fight to break your bonds, and the end will come in the shape of a cave-in! Fair warning!"

Blowing out the light, Dare Deverell moved away through the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SPORT FINDS A FRIEND.

Dare Deverell took the oil-lamp with him when he moved away, pausing when at some slight distance from the place where he had left his prisoner, listening intently.

He more than half anticipated hearing a desperate effort to break away on the part of Knox Bassett, in which case he knew there was danger of that leaning timber pulling loose, to be followed by an avalanche of dirt and stones commingled.

He stood ready to rush back and check that rash effort as soon as begun, showing Bassett how suicidal any such course would almost certainly prove; but no such sounds came to his ears during full ten minutes of waiting and listening, by which time he felt pretty well

assured that his warning had been well heeded.

Proceeding further along the tunnel, he smiled grimly as he passed the point where he had the day before found himself walled in by the cave of earth, and through which he had laboriously cut his way.

Once past this, Deverell knew there was no risk of being heard by Knox Bassett, or of his light being seen from that quarter, so he stopped and lit the lamp, coolly proceeding to the work he had already planned.

In an earlier venture forth from his unique refuge, the sport had "foraged" that lamp with its supply of kerosene, and at the same time had confiscated a pair of shears, which were now brought into play upon his mustaches.

These were clipped as closely as possible, and as Deverell had not felt razor or brush for several days, his upper lip matched well with the rest of his face so far as bristles went.

Mustaches clipped, Deverell rubbed dirt briskly into his skin until his whole face looked several shades darker, and as though he was a sworn enemy to water for lavatory purposes.

Next, he tore and soiled his clothes with artistic effect, giving all the semblance of long and rough wear, sparing no pains to make the contrast to his customary "spick and span" appearance as complete as possible.

Taking a review by aid of the lamp-light, the Dauntless Sport pronounced his work good, then turned down the wick and blew out the flame.

Placing the lamp where he would know where to reclaim it when desired, Deverell followed the tunnel to the adit, giving a low grunt of grim satisfaction as he found the day fully spent and nightfall come.

"Good enough! Not quite as early as I fancied, but all the better for that! Now for it! If caught by any of the gang—well, it'll have to be heels save your neck!"

First making sure no prying eyes were on the lookout right there, Dare crept forth from the vine-masked mouth, leaving as few signs as he possibly could, but moving with greater rapidity when once fairly away from that place of refuge.

He was headed now direct for Paradise Park, which place he intended to visit, trusting to his disguise, backed up by native audacity, to carry him safely through the dare-devil adventure.

Scarcely had he struck the town limits when he caught the first echoes of excitement, and was not long in learning how thoroughly this latest "hold-up" had stirred all Paradise.

On all sides he heard eager talk of Knox Bassett and the gambler's probable fate at the hands of—the Dare-Devil Sport!

For his own name was spoken almost as often as that of his supposed victim, and as he slouched lazily along, taking in all that came his way, Dare Deverell knew that he must prove his complete innocence past all doubting, or else pay penalty with his life when caught.

Not a single voice from out the many seemed to be raised on his behalf or in his defense! One and all now seemed to take it as proven that he was the arch-criminal! That he had held up the stage on both occasions, shooting Pope Carroll, poisoning Jack Winton, shamefully flogging Andrew Hammer.

Some even went so far as to explain just why that second series of crimes were wrought; to back up his oath that a "double" was at work to damn him, name and fame!

"If he'd once get back inside the jug, easy enough! Just butt his head against the wall hard enough to draw blood, then play 'possum until somebody came in the morning! He'd say his 'double' jumped them unawares, and so—sabe?"

The counterfeit tramp frowned darkly as he listened to this glib explanation from just without that open saloon door.

Even he could not deny it a certain degree of probability, and how much more readily would the citizens of Paradise Park give it credence now this latest outrage was likewise placed at his door?

But Dare Deverell was not running the risk of discovery when recognition meant almost certain death at the hands of a mob, merely to learn what people said and credited against him as man and brother.

For reasons of his own which he held fully justified the risk he was thus incurring, he had determined to at least make an effort to procure certain articles which could be found only in his own chamber at the hotel yonder.

Of course he knew that full possession of his valuables might have been taken by landlord or the town authorities, but that formed part and parcel of the chances he was taking.

Having learned past doubting just how Paradise Park viewed that recent hold-up, and how certainly they thought poor Knox Bassett was doomed past redemption by himself, Deverell passed on to the hotel, still playing the part of bumner or broken down prospector.

More than once he came into close contact with men who had known him long and intimately, but not one recognized that slouching, dirty and ragged, generally disreputable-looking tramp as the genial sport.

Deverell found comparative quiet reigning at the hotel, and after hanging around that place for some little time, taking notes and calculating his chances, he first made sure that he had the key to his room safely, then stole silently in at the little side-entrance just off one end of the bar and office combined.

As customary, there was a dimly burning lamp at the head of those stairs, and another further along the corridor which separated the double row of chambers.

As his eyes came to the level of that second floor, a single glance showed the Dare-Devil Sport that this corridor was just then free from human life, and quickening his pace he was soon at the door of his own room, trying key in lock.

That barrier swung silently open, and Dare stood with hand on gun as he flashed a keen look inside.

No sound came from the interior, and he caught breath a bit more quickly as he recognized his own grip lying near the head of the narrow bed, while garments to which he held the best right still hung against the partition walls.

Stepping inside the room, Deverell turned to look across the passage to a room from the transom of which shone a dimly burning lamp, for instinct told him that yonder lay the man whom he was accused of shooting with intent to kill!

"And she—little Noreen!" muttered the Sport, against whose life the hands of all men seemed lifted in pitiless hatred. "Does she—I wonder if they have won her over yet? Does—does she curse me, too?"

For a brief space it seemed as though the Sport would cross that brief space to learn for himself just how he stood in the estimation of the woman whom he could only recall as a fair young child.

He did take a step across the threshold with that intention, but then drew back and closed his chamber door, giving a low, scornful laugh at his worse than folly.

"She'd give a squeal and rouse the whole house! And—I'm a nice looking duck to go interviewing fine young ladies—I don't think!"

Sufficient light came through the transom to serve his ends, and for a brief space Dare Deverell bent over his valise, securing such articles as he desired sufficiently to run such imminent peril, then rising up to turn again to the door.

He listened with bent head for a brief space, but no alarming sound came to

his ears, and then he stepped into the corridor, turning to lock the chamber door just as he had found it.

This done, Deverell wheeled to beat a silent retreat, only to stop short with a low, involuntary cry as he found the corridor tenanted; and that tenant was—Noreen Carroll!

His first impulse was to flee in haste, but ere he could do so, the maiden gave a low cry of recognition, and, forgetting all else, Dare sprung her way, hands extended as he huskily spoke:

"Noreen—little cousin! As heaven hears me, I am innocent of—"

"I know—I believe you, Dare!" impulsively spoke the maiden, actually meeting him half way, with ready hands and glowing eyes! "With such a mother, you could not—oh, Dare!"

For the disguised fugitive was fairly carried off his balance by that glad discovery, and, hardly knowing what he was doing, clasped Noreen in his strong arms, kissing her swiftly, almost violently!

That little cry caused him to slacken his embrace, and draw back a bit, flushing hotly even through that mask of dirt; but instead of upbraiding her audacious cousin, or calling for help from others, Noreen agitatedly whispered:

"Go! Oh, Dare, please go before they find you out! They say—they would try to—to even kill you!"

"I am going, Noreen; but it's going to clear my good name in the eyes of all the world! I can—I will do this! I swore it before, but now—since you don't look upon me as a vile criminal—"

"Never, Dare!"

"Thank heaven—and you, little lady! If I might—hello!"

There is no saying just how far the Dare-devil Sport might have gone in his gratitude for finding this loyal friend had no interruption come; but just then a sharp exclamation caused both to turn toward the stairway, where they beheld Tracy Carroll looking that way, amazed!

"What means—ha! It's Dare Deverell, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DARE-DEVIL VENTURE.

That recognition was mutual, but while Tracy Carroll pronounced the name of the much-discussed Sport, he certainly could not feel positive his wild suspicions were correct.

But Deverell was not counting too much upon the ties of distant kinship just then, and with a swift leap and rush he was fairly upon the young man, sending him on the broad of his back with one tremendous stroke.

"Don't tell—you saw only a tramp!" the Sport took time to call back for Noreen's guidance, then ran swiftly down the stairs and out at the open door before the alarm could fairly spread further.

That heavy fall could hardly be expected to pass by without investigation, but Deverell knew that his deftly-delivered blow had for the time being placed Tracy Carroll beyond all power of accusation; and even if that young gentleman should awaken to a belief in his first wild impression, that charge would come all too late to endanger still further this modern Ishmaelite.

"If I'd only thought—if Noreen would only stick to it that she met a stranger by chance!" reflected the Dare-devil Sport, stopping short as he gained the street, turning as though he would retrace his steps far enough to give her that hint.

But sounds of growing excitement came from within the hotel, and, daredevil though he was at times, Deverell felt the worse than folly of taking any such long chances.

"The little lady—God bless her! She's quick and bright, and smart as they make 'em! She'll have plenty of time to shape her own story before Carroll gets up, and for the rest—pah! Trust her to blow dust in their peepers!"

Still, there was a risk of being accused of this latest exploit, and, knowing how hot would become the death-hunt should he be declared within the gates, Deverell hurried away from that immediate vicinity, looking on all sides, and peering curiously into each well-lighted saloon or other place of amusement in hopes of finding the witness named by Knox Bassett.

"Maybe he hasn't come back home, but if in town—well, he's so full of get-up that he couldn't help getting around to learn what fresh news had turned up!"

So the Sport mentally decided, and so he began the rounds once more in hopes of finding Ellis Morganstern.

If not that precise discovery, he made another which awakened hardly less interest in his brain—nothing less than Simon Whitehead, now, as ever, busy and malicious, flitting hither and yon, but all the time bitterly inveighing against the Dare-devil Sport.

"It's a shame—a burning, blasting shame that such things can be!" viciously "orated" the foxy little lawyer to a select audience by whom he received almost as many scoffs and jeers as he did cheers.

"I knew him from the very first! I recognized him as the vile robber who stripped a poor, wretched parent of all through which he hoped to find and reclaim his wandering boy! I knew him when—and now, this latest outrage follows close upon the heels of all the rest!"

"How much longer shall the red-handed poisoner run free? Raise the hue and cry, and never cease the hunt until the foul murderer is run down and hanged—hanged like the vilest of all vile curs say I!"

After this fierce, almost incoherent manner the lawyer went on, trying his level best to stir up the worst passions of his auditors; little suspecting the fact that this portion of his abominable tirade was being listened to by that very "criminal!"

Deverell was powerfully tempted to step inside the saloon and grip that vile rascal by the neck, to shake the whole truth of past events out of him; but that could hardly be without his getting into a fight with the whole town, which was what he now wished to avoid if possible.

For some little time the seeming tramp hung around, hoping that Simon would pass from that place in search of a still more inflammable audience; but just as though he felt peril in his precious bones Whitehead foiled those hope, by remaining right there.

Then, knowing that by this time Tracy Carroll must be recovered sufficiently to tell the tale of his downfall, when each minute would almost certainly add to his peril within those gates, Dare Deverell passed on to resume his almost hopeless search for Ellis Morganstern, the reputable citizen whom Knox Bassett named as his witness.

It is often the improbable which happens, and just so it turned out to be with the Dare-devil Sport on this occasion.

Just when he was about giving over his quest as useless waste of time which might be far better employed elsewhere, Deverell caught sight of the prominent citizen he wished rather than actually hoped to find!

There was no mistaking Ellis Morganstern for another, especially by one who knew him so well as did the Sport; and with an almost fierce thrill of delight Dare saw Morganstern leave that saloon, alone!

This was far more than the sport had dared expect, even after making that discovery, for Morganstern was a general favorite, and, as he was generous to a fault, one could not often catch him without quite a little army at his heels while "making the rounds."

But now the Sport dogged the merchant cautiously, finding him going toward his own home, as though intend-

ing to pass the remainder of that night in repose.

But it was fated not to be!

Watching his chance, Deverell drew nearer the merchant when they were in a comparatively deserted portion of Paradise Park, disguising his voice and keeping his hat well slouched as he hailed his man:

"I say, Mr. Morganstern!"

"Well, what is it?" bluntly demanded the citizen, as he turned to face the trampish looking customer.

"Beg pardon, sir, but—just to settle a little bet—did you sleep last night with Knox Bassett, over at Upper Crust?"

"Why do you ask? And who in time are you, anyway?" sternly demanded Morganstern, then giving a low cry of recognition the next instant.

"You—and here, Dare Deverell?"

"Steady, there!" sternly warned the Dare-devil Sport, as he covered Morganstern with a cocked revolver, checking that involuntary surge forward. "Button-lip, or fare worse!"

"You wouldn't shoot—"

"I'd hate to do it, but if you raise a row I'll kill you like a dog!" sternly menaced the Sport, moving that ugly muzzle still closer to the citizen's face. "Quiet, if you love life and fear death, Morganstern!"

It was no coward thus held up, but the mere fact of his being a brave man rendered Morganstern the better capable of judging the truth; and he knew that this dare-devil was making no empty threat.

"Don't shoot, man. What is it you wish with me, anyway?" he asked, tones steady and betraying no greater excitement than those made use of by Dare Deverell himself.

"First, make no mistake, Ellis Morganstern," came the guarded but resolute words. "I'm here to gain a certain point, and now I've exposed my card, I'll take the trick if it costs a dozen lives!"

"Mine will not be among them, unless you have really turned assassin, as many people declare, Mr. Deverell!"

The Sport flinched perceptibly at this keen cut, but his aim did not vary in the least, and he was safe from assault as long as he could hold the drop.

"That's part reason why I'm in Paradise this night, Morganstern," Deverell forced himself to utter in steady tones. "And I want you to do your share toward clearing up this devilish mystery which covers me all over. Will you do it, sir?"

"That depends. What am I to do, first?"

"Tell the solid truth, first, last, all the time!"

"That oughtn't to be so terribly hard," with a half-laugh.

"No; because you are an honest man, white as they ever make 'em!" earnestly declared Deverell, a slight tremor showing in his voice. "Then I may count on you, sir?"

"Once more, that depends. I never did like to be driven, and when a fellow comes at me, gun foremost—well, it starts the bristles up and down my ridge-pole! Understand?"

"This is trifling, sir, and—"

"Then I'll give you solid business, Mr. Deverell," came the cold interruption. "Tell me just what it is you wish me to do. Tell me just how you calculate on my aiding your clearance, or I'll say never a word more, gun or no gun, murder or no murder!"

Ellis Morganstern spoke in even tones, but these were far more effective than if he had raged and fumed. Deverell knew that he meant each and every syllable, and so yielded a point in his turn.

"It's about Knox Bassett, mainly. You know how strongly he resembles me in face and figure, when both are at our best?"

"Of course. Who in Paradise doesn't? But—where is Bassett?"

"Alive, but how long he'll stay so is

—never mind! What I'm getting at is just this:

"I have been publicly accused of playing road-agent, shooting an old and harmless stranger, whipping Andy Hammer—and even worse than all that!"

"Those who accuse seem to have proof to back up their words, too," coldly cut in Ellis Morganstern.

"Lies—all lies, black as hell!" passionately pronounced the fugitive Sport, yet still standing on guard, although his revolver was lowered a bit for the moment.

"I tell you this, Morganstern, as though before my father confessor, if I had faith that way! I swear to you that I never did one thing of all these devils in human shape lay at my door, save and except escaping from the lynchers and taking Knox—"

"Careful, Sport!" murmured Morganstern as rapid steps reached their ears, and a single man the next moment turned the nearest corner, saved from an actual collision only by an abrupt recoil.

That newcomer proved to be Simon Whitehead, and his sharp cry declared his instant recognition.

"You—and here—Dare Deverell!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAPTURING A WITNESS.

The lawyer recoiled as that recognition came, for he must have felt that death alone could be the reward for all he had done and attempted to do against this reckless adventurer.

He certainly would have yelled out at the top of his voice, quite as much for his own protection as the capture or death of his enemy, but once again the quick wit and swift action of the Dare-Devil Sport came to the rescue.

One cat-like leap carried him within fair reach, and at the same instant he struck with clubbed revolver, sending Simon Whitehead to earth before that yell of commingled alarm and horror could fairly find birth.

Then, Swifter still, the Dare-Devil Sport, covered Ellis Morganstern once more, speaking sternly:

"Don't force me to kill you, sir!"

"Not if I know myself, but—"

"Come, then!" and his free hand grasped an arm and pushed the citizen away from that spot where lay living evidence which might prove dangerous if seen by other eyes.

Morganstern might very well have given the sport serious trouble, if not an actual defeat, if such had been his ardent wish.

To one used to taking care of himself in rough and tough company, it would not have been a very difficult matter for the doughty merchant of Paradise Park to turn the tables while Deverell was engaged with Simon Whitehead; but Dare had said quite sufficient to rouse a powerful curiosity in Morganstern's mind, and so he made no attempt to even up matters after that fashion.

Although no actual resistance was made, Deverell kept his captive witness well under the muzzle of his gun all the way, hurrying him along the street, keeping covered as much as possible, and making one abrupt turn in order to avoid a meeting with a couple of men who chanced to be coming their way.

After this manner the town was fairly cleared without any hindrance to further complicate matters, and not until he felt fairly assured of success in this one hope did Deverell call a halt for the purpose of explaining matters.

"Good enough, so far!" he ejaculated, letting his hand fall from that arm, although he still kept on guard with drawn weapon. "If you'll only play as white clean to the end of the route—"

"Well, that depends," coolly cut in the Paradise merchant.

"On what?"

"Where do you want me to go, and what for?"

A brief pause as though for reflection, then the Sport spoke again:

"I am going to take you face to face with Knox Bassett, to prove or disprove what he has sworn to me! Will you go?"

"Suppose I object?"

"I hope not! Because you're about the last man in Paradise that I'd like to use roughly."

"And that means?"

"That means you're going, willing or not!" resolutely declared the Dare-naught Sport, left hand again closing upon that arm. "I've come all this way on the blind chance of finding you, sir, and now I've got you I intend holding my grip until all's settled, one way or the other!"

"And if I should really kick against going your way?"

"'Twould make just this much difference: I'd knock you stiff, then tote you like a sack of flour—on my back!"

Morganstern laughed softly at this blunt declaration, and really seemed pleased rather than angered, for he then said:

"All right, my hearty! I'll walk rather than put you to all that extra trouble. So—lead the way, will you?"

"It's white, pardner?"

"Straight goods, Deverell. There's my hand on it if you like!"

"That's better than good enough!" exclaimed the sport, putting up his pistol and clapping that proffered hand with both of his own. "And when all this queer mix-up is past and cleared away, I'll apologize to you until you can't rest!"

"That's all right, too, but—were you in earnest about Bassett?"

"Dead earnest, sir! I've got him safe and sound, and it partly rests with you if he ever—but suppose we leave all that until once saying can serve for all?"

"So be it! Now—which way, Deverell?"

The Dare-Devil Sport was only too willing to show the way, now all difficulties had been smoothed over, and like two earnest and dearest of friends, the couple fairly turned back upon Paradise Park, hurrying off toward that quarter where Knox Bassett had been left in such grim companionship.

Although Dare Deverell preferred leaving that particular point in abeyance for the time being, he was less averse to touching upon other parts of his strange experience during the past day or two; and as they walked along Ellis Morganstern for the first time gained a correct idea of the other side of that curiously tangled affair.

He made no positive statement to that effect, but by the time their journey was nearing its end Morganstern had formed a vastly more favorable opinion of Dare Deverell than had been his for a couple of days past, to say the least.

He expressed some little curiosity when he found they were to enter the old workings, for, in common with nearly everybody who gave the matter thought at all, he believed such access was long since barred.

Lighting the oil-lamp when they progressed that far, Deverell made faster progress, being greeted by a hoarse, glad cry from the haggard-faced gambler, who betrayed what severe torments he had passed through during that comparatively brief absence.

But when he recognized the person who bore Deverell company a low glad cry escaped his lips, and he cried aloud:

"Tell him; show him that I couldn't—"

"Steady, there!" sternly cut in the Sport, one hand closing over those lips to check further utterance. "I'll state the case, if you please, then you can make any amendments if I do it unfairly for your side, Mr. Bassett."

"Better so, I reckon, Bassett," gravely advised the Paradise merchant. "If the truth can save you, be sure that will not be slow in coming."

"It's the solid truth I'm after, whether for or against myself," declared Deverell, removing his hand and standing before the two men, prisoner and witness.

"You both know what I have been accused of, so there's no need to repeat it all. I declare my complete innocence, in spite of the seemingly damning proof brought to confirm those charges."

"I repeat that the fellow who worked all that evil last night showed me a face strongly resembling my own, while he had me foul up in the hills. I believe that devil to have been Knox Bassett, and so—"

"You are barking along the wrong trail, Dare Deverell," gravely cut in the merchant, making each word almost painfully distinct. "I am ready to make my Bible oath that Knox Bassett was not that person at all!"

"You really mean all that, sir?" almost harshly demanded Deverell.

"Every syllable of it! Because I was at Upper-crust last night, and when I went to bed, at ten o'clock Knox Bassett went with me! I am a very light sleeper, and I have no hesitancy in swearing that Mr. Bassett could not possibly have left that bed during the night without my full knowledge."

"Didn't I tell you so?" exultantly cried the gambler.

Instead of words, Dare Deverell acted. In grim silence he showed Morganstern that painfully scrawled accusation found by the dying jailer, then pointed to where that ghastly accuser was propped up.

In silence Morganstern puzzled through that incoherent writing, then soberly said:

"Of course the poor fellow must have believed it all, yet you can see that he spoke only positively of Simon Whitehead, giving it as his belief that the other was Knox Bassett."

"I swear it wasn't, though!"

"And I as positively swear that it couldn't have been Bassett who released you from jail, flogged Andy Hammer, poisoned Jack Winston, and, as it now seems, killed Bill Davis," positively added the witness brought hither by Dare Deverell himself.

This was an intensely bitter blow to the Dare-Devil Sport, but, knowing Ellis Morganstern as he did, he likewise knew that fear nor friendship could ever win a false oath from his lips.

And so, drawing the knife taken from the corpse of Bill Davis, he silently cut the bonds which held Knox Bassett helpless up to that moment, after which he grimly said:

"I most humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Bassett. I see now that you were right, and I in error. If you see fit to demand satisfaction—"

"Ah, never talk like that, Deverell!" good-naturedly interposed Morganstern, who was clasping hands with the man whom his evidence had won back to liberty. "We'll help you learn the whole truth, rather than take out a petty spite by a duel or street-fight. Eh, Bassett?"

But the gambler was not ready to yield so gracefully, and, as he kept silence, Deverell spoke in his place:

"I'll make what amends lie in my power, willingly enough, rest assured. But—if it isn't asking too much—I'd like an armistice until I can get my grips fairly on that devil Simon Whitehead!"

"That's the ticket! He's the man you'd ought to have gone for at the start, Deverell!"

"I know, now; but—well, I was playing for my double, and I could not think of any other save—your pardon, Mr. Bassett!"

"I'll grant that for him," quickly cut in Morganstern, evidently bent on playing the role of peacemaker. "Give him time, please, Deverell, and we'll all come out jaybird together!"

Instead of making answer in words, the Dare-Devil Sport bent ear toward yonder shaft, giving a little hiss of warning as he held up a hand for silence; then he blew out the light, muttering guardedly:

"Easy! There's somebody up at the shaft-mouth, yonder!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DOUBLE AND HIS PAL.

Simon Whitehead saw that dreaded enemy coming, but that was all. He had not time to duck or to dodge, and fell like a sodden log before that clubbed revolver.

Still, the foxy little lawyer was gifted with a skull as thick and hard as his conscience was tough, and, in a marvelously brief space of time, all things considered, he gave a gasping groan and struggled to a sitting posture, hands clasping his aching head as though he felt the need of a bandage to hold that skull together.

He stared dazedly around, for a brief space, unable to realize just what had taken place; but then memory quickened, and with a low cry of fear he scrambled to his feet, and staggered away, shrinking and flinching from an imaginary shower of vicious blows.

But, once in motion, he was not long in getting at a more correct idea of matters and things, and then, failing to see or hear aught of the Dare-devil Sport, he took stock of his own injuries.

Beyond a sore head and lacerated scalp, he was all right; and those were set down as trifles in comparison with the amazing fact that Dare Deverell was—or recently had been—actually in Paradise Park!

What had he come back for, when he must know that discovery would be equivalent to death by the rope of Judge Lynch?

"Does he know, or even suspect? Where has he lain in hiding until—was he here after—us?"

For some little time Simon Whitehead puzzled his aching head over all this, but he got under way once more, mumbling to himself as he skurried along through the night:

"He'll be waiting for me, and it must be done! I can't rest easy so long as the ugly doubt remains unsettled! Curse the luck, anyway! If he'd only mentioned—why not make sure, first?"

Evidently the foxy little lawyer was in anything but a comfortable state of mind, and just as plainly all his worryment did not proceed from that amazing encounter with the Dare-devil Sport.

Still, he kept constantly upon the alert, looking around in all directions every few steps, as though he more than half expected to catch sight of Deverell coming to finish the work so well begun over yonder.

And, when he was only a short distance from the particular place he had in view, Simon Whitehead met with another sensation—brief-lived, but none the less thrilling while it lasted.

He saw a dark shape just ahead, and, a moment later it passed into the bright light streaming forth from a saloon door, revealing the clear-cut features, the black, curly hair and well-cared-for mustaches of—

"Dare Deverell, or—" gasped the lawyer, involuntarily shrinking away like one about to break into actual flight.

"Easy, you fool!" came the stern warning from those mustached lips, as the other man heard and divined the error. "No names, or—"

At the same instant he sprung swiftly forward and grasped the terrified lawyer, one firm palm slipping over that open mouth to smother another cry of affright.

Then recognition came, and Whitehead let his muscles relax.

"You know me now, eh?" muttered the Dare-devil's double, grip relaxing to suit. "I'm John Smith, remember!"

While saying this, he forced the lawyer back until both were well out of that dangerous light, his own hat taking on a more pronounced slouch as he realized the danger of recognition from other eyes.

Whitehead gave a long breath as he was released, an unsteady hand rising to brush across that sweat-damp brow before he spoke again:

"What a shock you gave me, Smith! When I glimpsed at your face—"

"Is the resemblance so mighty strong, then?" interrupted the other, with a low chuckle.

"So strong that— I really saw him, just a bit ago, though!"

"Saw whom?"

"The Sport—Deverell, I mean."

"Are you gone crazy, man?"

"No; but I felt like going dead when I saw him yonder."

"Come off! You surely were mistaken, Whitehead!"

"Give me your finger until—so!" and Simon had to smile as his companion in scheming jerked his hand away at feeling both scalp-cut and fresh blood.

"That's where he knocked me flat as a flounder when I recognized him—like a fool, as I'm free to confess! If I'd only had wit enough to pass on in silence, then raise a posse to jump him unawares!"

"I'd give a clean thousand chucks if you had!" vehemently declared the fellow who assumed the time-honored name of John Smith. "But, what could he be after here in Paradise? Surely he can't suspect the truth?"

"If I really thought that, I'd be skipping out in a holy hurry for more healthy quarters," grimly vowed the foxy lawyer; but, changing the subject abruptly, he demanded: "Got the rope ready?"

"It's where we can pick it up as we go along. This isn't another one of your fairy tales, old man?"

"Don't you begin to think it! I tell you I distinctly heard groans coming up from the bottom of that shaft, where you knocked—"

"Steady, idiot!" with savage emphasis, as he hurried on the faster. "Mention no names and bottle up until we're fairly out of town, can't you?"

Whitehead complied, so far, and but one brief halt was made ere the brace of knaves were well clear of the town—barely long enough to pick up a coil of rope from where it lay hidden in a bush off that deserted street.

When once beyond the outskirts of Paradise Park, John Smith spoke again:

"You couldn't have been mistaken about those sounds, Whitehead?"

"I know I wasn't!" with almost vicious emphasis.

"I can't make it come clear, even yet! People tell of that shaft being all of sixty feet deep, or even more! And I struck hard enough to crack any common skull, let alone the fall that came after! Surely it must have been imagination, Simon!"

"Imagination be blessed! I tell you I caught the sounds, and I tried to make all sure by throwing down rocks and stones enough to mash the life clean out of the devil, if below."

"Then what's the sense in making such a venture as this?" growlingly demanded Mr. Smith. "If any person should see us there, and the truth ever came out about—well, about him!"

"Isn't it worth all risks to make sure he'll never tell tales out of school, though?" impatiently asked the lawyer.

Only an ugly growl came by way of answer, then the brace of precious rascals pressed on through the night, saying nothing further until almost at their journey's end.

During this period of silence, however, Simon Whitehead apparently indulged in some serious reflection, no doubt started by the memory of what fate had overtaken Bill Davis not so very far from that spot.

And when only a few more rods remained to be covered before they could fairly sight yonder old shaft, the suspicious lawyer called a halt.

"Just wait a bit, please, Mr. Smith."

"Well, what's biting you now?"

"Just this: I'm hardly strong enough to help you a great deal in climbing out of the shaft again, and so—"

"All right; you can go down, and I'll manage the rope," readily suggested John

Smith—too readily, in fact, for it seemed to confirm the doubts which Simon had been nursing during the last few minutes.

"That would seem easier, of course, but, let me say a word or two before we go any nearer that opening, please."

"All right. What is it now?"

"Do you know, Mr. Smith, I'm peculiar in some respects. For instance, take this little expedition. Looks safe enough, doesn't it?"

"Oh, go on! You make me ear-sick with your everlasting chin-chin!"

"And I'm a great hand to make provision for the future," smoothly pursued the little law-sharp. "And so, I just wrote out our full neat little contract concerning—"

"The blazes you say!" fairly exploded John Smith, catching Whitehead by an arm and shaking him viciously.

"And put it where it'll be read if I don't report just so often."

With amazing rapidity came this suggestive information, but John Smith caught its full force, missing not so much as a syllable.

"What in the devil's name do you mean, anyway?" he hoarsely demanded, slackening his grip and actually recoiling from that insignificant-looking adversary.

"That I'm perfectly willing to trust my life at one end of this rope, with you at the other, so long as you fully comprehend the truth: that in case anything should happen to me, the person to whom I intrusted that sealed confession—I mean statement—"

"You never was fool enough to put all that into writing? And, worse yet, to trust it in other hands?" angrily demanded Mr. Smith.

"I'd be a still worse idiot were I to trust my life in your hands after this fashion, without first taking some such precaution," retorted the wary practitioner.

"As though I'd hurt you, man alive!"

"So Bill Davis probably thought; yet, something did hurt him!"

A brief pause, during which Mr. Smith seemed weighing the situation; then he said, in altered tones:

"I reckon we'd better turn back, Simon. Of course there's not much danger in your going down the shaft, but, while such a writing—oh, you infernal idiot. What if the seal should be broken, and—"

"That will never happen unless I should stay out of sight, and at the same time fail to report by writing, for the space of twenty-four hours," blandly assured the lawyer.

"In such a case?"

"The seal would be broken, the statement read, and prompt steps be taken to—well, doubtless you can guess just what! Now, come on! I am really anxious to see how cautiously you can lower me down that old shaft, my dear friend!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE FOR SIMON.

Only an ear of exceptional keenness could have caught those sounds at all, much less located them so accurately, although no doubt past experience had something to do with this.

Giving that hasty warning, the Dare-devil Sport silently sprung to the shaft itself, looking upward to where the mouth was fairly visible against the starry sky.

Closely following came both Morganstern and Bassett, and as the three pair of keen eyes looked upward, one and all caught sight of a human head and shoulders at one edge of yonder opening.

"Whom do you suppose it is?" asked the merchant, in guarded whispers, as they stood there taking eager notes.

"Not sure, but big money it's Whitehead! And if—look!"

Another head became visible, and indistinct mutterings came floating down the old shaft.

"Dodge back if you see 'em drop any dumplings!" warned the Dreadnaught

Sport. "It may be that—if they only would try it on!"

"What? Stone us out?"

"No, but come down to learn for certain—glory to the ram! I do really believe that's just what they're going to try on!"

Almost breathlessly this came, yet there appeared to be fair foundation for that belief, after all.

Yonder heads disappeared for a short space; then louder sounds were heard by the watchers below. A few seconds later those sounds materialized in the shape of a stout timber which the two men placed across the mouth of the shaft.

This was enough to satisfy the keen-witted sport as to what was in contemplation, and knowing as he did that Simon Whitehead had only the night before paid that shaft a "business visit," he felt fairly safe in concluding that one of yonder oddly acting fellows was the adroit little limb-of-the-law.

Now that Knox Bassett had proven an alibi which could not be doubted, his sole hope of clearing away the chain of mysteries which had fairly wrapped him round of late days lay in capturing and forcing a full confession from Simon Whitehead.

All this flashed through his brain, and his resolve was as quickly taken.

Turning to his companions, Deverell drew them back into the tunnel, then speaking in whispers:

"One of yonder knaves is almost certainly Simon Whitehead, and he surely knows how Bill Davis came by his death! Now, will you help me clear away all this nasty mix, gentlemen?"

"Tell us how," curtly suggested Morganstern.

"One of those rascals will come down here to make sure about Davis, but it may not be my man; understand?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Good! If you'll wait for the one that does come this way, and grip him tight; will you, though?"

"Sure as death, pardner!"

"Thanks! I'll hustle out and jump the one who stays up aloft; and between us—"

"If there should happen to be more than one?"

"I'm good for an even half-dozen, far as that goes," with grim resolution. "But I don't look for more. There were but a couple besides Davis, I know, and so—listen!"

Another look up the shaft showed them the men in busy preparation for that descent, and fearing to lose further time, Deverell swiftly added as all drew back:

"Take him without a row if you can, gentlemen, but take him! If you can shut off his wind so his mate up yonder can't suspect too soon, I'll come out jaybird!"

"That's what we'll do if it lies in the cards!" declared the gambler; but Dare Deverell was no longer listening.

Satisfied that, as far as possible, his newly made friends and allies would act in his interests, the Dauntless Sport hurried off past yonder corpse, making all practical speed along that dark passage, hoping to clear the tunnel and speed up the hillside to the mouth of the old shaft in time to capture the fellow remaining above-ground.

Now that Deverell had left them, Morganstern and Bassett had nothing to divert their attention from what was going on above, and standing well within the mouth of the drift, so as to draw back in case anything dangerous to human life should take a tumble down the shaft, they waited and watched with burning curiosity.

That stout timber was securely placed across the opening, and some little time was spent in making it secure, since the main weight of Simon Whitehead was to be placed upon it, "John Smith" merely guiding the rope as it should slip over while the lawyer descended.

"Yonder he comes!" whispered Bassett, softly.

They both saw a human figure carefully "cooning" out on that timber, pausing for a brief space, then gingerly slipping over one side of that prop, feet thrust through a loop in the end of a rope, evidently intending to sit in that loop while being lowered away.

"Looks like Simon, for a fact, pardner!" muttered Morganstern, now strongly interested in this little drama. "We've got to take him, Knox!"

"Of course; but just how?"

"It ought to be easy enough, since he isn't fetching any light with him," came the answer as they beheld the little counsellor swing fairly clear of that brace, slowly coming their way at the end of a rope.

Morganstern slipped out of his coat, handing it to Bassett while whispering:

"I'll keep him from kicking, if you'll muffle his head. Don't mind choking him if he tries to squeal too loud!"

There was no time for further communications, for Simon was drawing nearer the bottom of the shaft, and his wakeful ears might take the alarm too soon—if not in time to save himself, at least soon enough to warn his accomplice above-ground.

When yet a few feet above the bottom, Whitehead drew a match across one thigh, the light leaping up brilliantly and sending both Morganstern and Bassett scurrying away into the tunnel, for fear of premature discovery.

"How is it?" called a voice from above, to which the lawyer made instant reply.

"All right, so far! A few feet more and—steady now!"

The match was still ablaze when Whitehead touched those rocks with his feet, and, thanks to that totally unexpected action, the men in waiting felt obliged to postpone their rush.

Simon quickly slipped out of the noose, leaving the rope to dangle until he should require its services again.

"What luck, confound you, man!" came impatiently from the surface.

"Wait, and let me have a chance to see for myself, can't you?" called back the little law-sharp, striking another match and holding flame to the wick of a candle-end brought along in his pocket for just such an emergency as this.

Still further discomfited, the two men on guard shrank back as they saw this action, fearing to make their assault now, lest they be seen by the lawyer's pal above.

Whitehead flashed his flickering light over the bottom of the shaft, giving a curious grunt as he failed to see aught of the corpse which he knew ought to be close at hand; but, ere he could take affright at its absence, he glimpsed the tunnel and started that way with a low ejaculation of surprise.

He knew nothing of other workings than that single shaft; but, as he pushed on inside that drift, he made a discovery which gave him quite a shock: the body of Bill Davis, propped up against one side of the tunnel!

Surely he had crushed that body under yonder rocks! Surely one so crushed could never move thus far, or assume such a curious position?

Simon Whitehead stared in amazement at that ghastly vision, and thus he sealed his own doom, for in perfect silence those two watchers leaped upon him, crushing him to earth like a broken reed!

There was no outcry, and hardly the semblance of a struggle on his part, so complete was that surprise, and so surely did those two men do their work in unison.

Choked, blinded, pinioned arms and legs, Lawyer Whitehead was quickly placed beyond power of working further harm, for the time being at least.

This done, Morganstern muttered in low tones to the gambler:

"Sit on him, Bassett! Keep him from giving even a squeak while I—steady, all!"

From yonder shaft came sounds which told of growing impatience on the part of the man left on the surface, and the Paradise merchant hastened to win a view of what might be going on in that direction.

Looking upward, he saw the torso of a man outlined against the stars, and heard a hoarse voice make the demand:

"Speak up, curse ye! What's the word down yonder?"

Morganstern hesitated for a moment or two, hardly knowing what to do, lest he should frighten away the knave before Dare Deverell could cover the ground; but that fierce demand was repeated, while the rope was shaken violently.

"I say, you old fool! What have you found? How goes it? Talk white, or Satan burn me if you can't stay there until—"

"It's all right, so far!" called back a voice so amazingly like that of Simon Whitehead as to give Morganstern a great start, in spite of his strong nerves.

It proved to be Bassett, who imitated that voice, and who added in a hurried whisper for the merchant's benefit:

"I've choked Simon still enough! So—great glory!—look out!"

For, just then, both men heard a sharp, angry cry above, and saw that leaning figure draw swiftly back, just as though he had discovered an enemy approaching. Then—

With a wild, horrified yell a man toppled over the edge of the old shaft, pitching downward, headforemost!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DOUBLE UNMASKED.

Never man living used greater exertions to "get there" in time, than did Dare Deverell; and it really seemed as though perfect success was about to reward his efforts.

He caught sight of a human shape kneeling at one side of the shaft-mouth, as he approached, and knew from this that all must have gone well, thus far.

He was almost within leaping distance when his foot turned on a loose stone, and saving himself from an awkward fall made noise enough sufficient to alarm yonder Double.

The schemer leaped erect with a fierce cry, and as he saw the Dare-devil Sport springing his way once more he drew a revolver, at the same time springing backward, forgetting what lay so close at his heels.

One wild, horrified yell; then he vanished from view, leaving Deverell horror-stricken and helpless, for the moment.

The sport rallied quickly, however, rushing forward and leaning far over that shaft-opening as he gave a hoarse cry to his friends below.

The answer was delayed for a time, and all seemed confusion on the lower level; then a candle shone forth, and presently Morganstern called up the shaft:

"Dead! Mashed to a pulp—almost!"

"Wait—I'll come—by the drift!" Deverell called back, turning away from the shaft, for once with iron-nerves shaken too greatly for a second thought of descending by means of that rope.

Rapidly as he moved, it naturally took some little time to retrace his steps, and when the sport at length came to where Morganstern and Bassett were in waiting, he found them pale indeed, but intensely excited, the merchant hailing him with:

"We've got both ends of the mix-up, pardner! And, look!"

The light was flashed upon the face of the one who had so cunningly duped all Paradise Park, and Dare Deverell stood like one petrified, so great was his amazement.

For, still alive, though terribly injured by his fall, the Dare-devil Sport's Double was propped up near where Simon Whitehead lay, and the arch-schemer was—

Tracy Carroll!

That awful fall had knocked off his wig of curly black hair, showing his own

yellow hair close cut, the shorn locks (as was shown later on) having been cunningly fashioned into another wig which he wore when appearing as himself.

As soon as Deverell could rally from his amazement, he begged Morganstern to coax or reason the whole truth out of the injured man, whom all felt could not live so very much longer; and keeping himself in the background, the sport listened eagerly to those broken yet readily comprehended sentences.

For now the arch-schemer had lost all his nerve, and seemed only anxious to clear up everything ere death should claim himself.

More than once Simon Whitehead strove to interrupt, to viciously deny, but Knox Bassett effectually silenced him by shoving a tight gag between his jaws.

It took both time and patience to win a full confession, for there was so much to explain, so many mysteries to clear away; but Morganstern proved himself equal to the task, and Tracy Carroll lived more than long enough to give all essential details of that intricate but devilish plot.

Simon Whitehead was at the bottom of it all, for he brought word across the ocean that a wealthy relative of Pope Carroll had recently died, willing everything to him.

Unfortunately for all concerned, Whitehead was the lawyer employed both to draw up that will and to keep it in charge; for he resolved to win at least a portion of those millions, and acted accordingly.

In days gone by, Pope Carroll had unjustly treated his hot-headed young stepson, Dare Deverell, and that stern judgment resulted in a run-away which nearly broke the tender heart of the lad's loving mother.

Many efforts were made to find Dare, but all in vain, and his mother became a confirmed invalid, holding firm faith in her only son's innocence through all.

Then Pope Carroll discovered his sad mistake, and knew that Dare had been right from the first—that he never did the wrong with which he stood charged, and for which he had been so harshly punished.

From that discovery Pope Carroll had but two ends in life: to keep his invalid wife alive and hoping to once again be blessed by sight of her idolized son, and to find that runaway if still living.

He enlisted his own son, Tracy, in the search, and finally the young man reported that he had made that longed-for discovery.

Meanwhile, Simon Whitehead had sought out the son, and together they schemed for full possession of all those millions, to say nothing of the large fortune which Pope Carroll possessed, of his own gathering.

For Tracy believed—with good reason, too—that his father, morbid through remorse for past injustice, intended to leave everything he possessed to that errant but not erring step-son.

Through a bit of amateur safe-cracking, Tracy got hold of a will made directly after that discovery, in which Dare Deverell was given all of which the testator might die possessed, as a partial recompense for cruel injustice done him in days gone by.

Keeping his own identity a secret, so far as Dare Deverell was concerned, Tracy made a close study of the Dare-devil Sport, then made his own arrangements accordingly, cutting his hair to form a wig, and copying that which adorned the sport's head and face.

Then, when all was in readiness, he sent word for father to come at once to Paradise Park; and Simon Whitehead was given the office at the same time.

Thus the dangerous game was fairly opened.

Tracy really meant to kill his father on that occasion, and in order to win a fair excuse, and at the same time further fix

the double crime upon the entrapped sport, he made his mask fall, adroitly.

Failing to slay, then, his nerve failed him when further attempts in that same direction were spoken of, and he bent all his powers toward so thoroughly blackening the reputation of Deverell that Pope Carroll would never dare recognize him as heir, much less take him back to that invalid wife and mother.

And, also, he calculated so surely on leading the mob to hang his Double! While ostensibly defending the accused, his every step was taken with an eye to still further convincing all Paradise Park of that criminality; and, but for circumstances wholly beyond his power of controlling, his diabolically ingenious schemes would surely have won the vast stakes he was playing for, in conjunction with the unprincipled little lawyer.

This, in brief, covers the confession made by the terribly injured man, and when Simon Whitehead savagely denounced Carroll as a liar, pure and simple, Tracy spoke of the statement in writing which his confederate had left in other hands, begging them to look the matter up and from that see how truly he had spoken.

This broke the lawyer down, and he proved himself a veritable cur; but no one listened to him, and when his whinings grew too offensive he was once more gagged.

That written statement was finally discovered at the express office, left for safe keeping, and when opened in the presence of a select committee of Paradise citizens it told enough to wholly clear the Dare-devil Sport in the eyes of all, friends and enemies alike!

The awful death and black sins of his son, neither of which could be kept from him, proved a heavy blow to Mr. Carroll, from which he never entirely recovered.

Noreen and Dare nursed him tenderly, by night and by day, incidentally renewing their long-ago acquaintance, which quickly ripened into something far more precious; and when Mr. Carroll declared his ability to return homeward, the young couple were betrothed!

They were wedded not many weeks later, and two gentle-toned invalids smiled upon that union, two voices blessed the newly married couple; but only one of those two lived long enough to welcome the first-born.

Pope Carroll gradually faded away, and when he was in his last earthly home his will was opened and read, to find that all that vast fortune was bequeathed to Dare and Noreen, in equal parts, while Mrs. Carroll held a life interest in the property.

Simon Whitehead was never brought to trial for all the crimes in which he played so prominent a part, simply because the lynchers rendered any such action a useless formality!

The execrable rogue "went up a tree in fine shape!"

One of those who held the right end of the rope was Andrew Hammer, who afterward pronounced it the finest possible cure for sore backs!

THE END.

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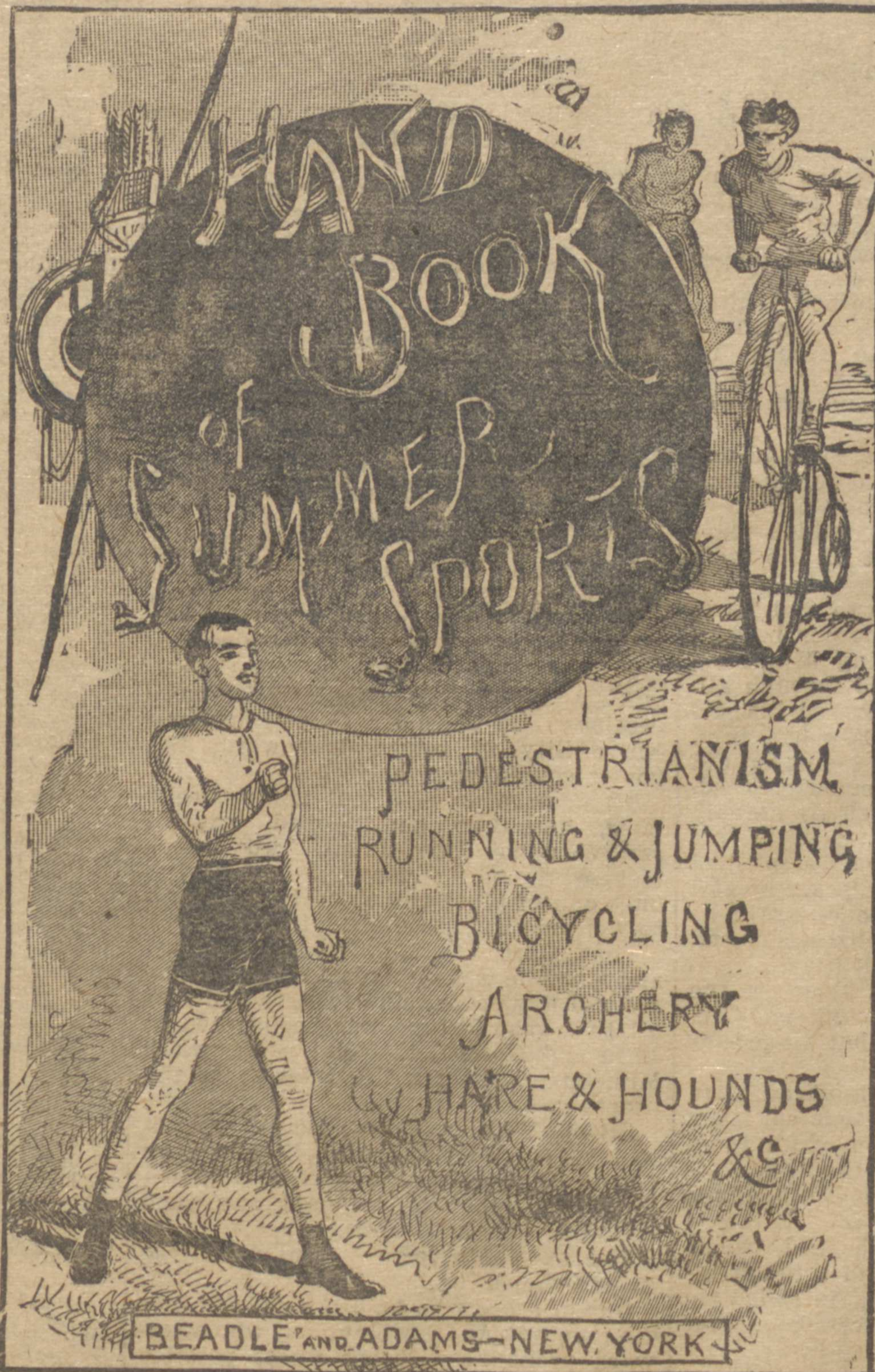
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